When Leaves Were Green

By

S. Cope Morgan

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When Leaves were Green

Catching Great Whales

WHEN LEAVES WERE GREEN

BY

SYDNEY COPE MORGAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

JOAN BUCKMASTER

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TO the various prototypes of the children who live in these pages, especially the one who tucked the Author up in bed when he was young—this book is dedicated.

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Preface.

This is a book about children. I fear that the original Dick has now grown to an age when he will despise this picture of himself as "making him a stupid *kid.*" Actually, he was a very charming person.

To try to recapture that earlier charm has been a task full of delight, marred only by one's sense of inadequacy in the completion of it.

The others, too, have their prototypes, but they talk more wisely nowadays. And as for Molly—when she is yet a little older I shall marry her, if Dick—and she—will let me. Aunt Susan will probably say it is "very unwise," but—if only I could have let the reader see how nice Molly used to be!

My especial thanks are due to my friends, Max Ede and Leslie Ferguson, for suggestions at the proof-reading stage, and the Hon. Mrs. Owen Buckmaster for contributing her art to this volume.

SYDNEY COPE MORGAN.

TRINITY COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE,
August, 1919.

I walked in the garden at break of day;
The air with the song of the birds was gay,
  And a golden sheen
Was over the world — And flowers were there,
Bedecked with dew as with jewels rare
  When the leaves were green.

I walked in the garden in afternoon;
The glory of Eden had gone too soon,
  And the sun went down,
But touched with a glorious red-gold glint
The garden, aglow with its Autumn tint,
  When the leaves were brown.

I walked in the garden in pale moonlight;
In the cold and the silence of Winter's night;
  For the year had sped.
No more was the song of the birds on high,
And the trees made lace-work against the sky
  When the leaves were dead.

Chapter I.

Thy Neighbour's Goods.

The nursery was large enough to serve as a prairie as occasion demanded. Bears—of the "Teddy" variety—were often hunted across its rolling plains, and being somewhat stiff in the joints, were usually caught. Or again, vast armies waged war with one another—armies comprising at least two dozen men apiece, if one counted sundry crippled warriors, including a headless General on a tailless steed. And these were not only invariably counted, but did as valiant service as any hero on the field.

Dick, the five year old, had from time immemorial possessed proprietary rights over the General, and the claim was difficult to deny since it was he who, long months ago, had caused the crippling of this gallant officer.

But Mary, being eight and very modern, asserted herself as lord—or lady—over the only cannon. This was a fearful devastating instrument, which shot two peas a minute with extreme rapidity. Her rights, however, were the subject of embittered controversy, and the origin of her claim was in this manner.

A ridiculous uncle had presented the thing to Dick when the latter was merely four. At this age the military spirit had not claimed Dick as its own, and cannons were beyond the pale of interesting

playthings. Dick, to tell the truth, was then longing to grow up in order to wear the green velveteens of the modern railway porter, and to slam—loudly—the doors of moving trains.

But to Mary, at the age of seven, the implement of war made strong appeal. So she annexed it, and at first was left in undisputed possession of her prize. But to the good and ill alike the Day of Reckoning comes. When it came, Mary set her lips, brushed a curl from her shoulder, and stated her case. She did not, of course, say in so many words—being then between seven and eight—that possession is nine points of the law, though that was the fundamental principle on which her claim was based. What she actually said was this: "It's mine now. You didn't want it and now it has been given to me."

"Oh you wicked story, d'you know where you'll go ?" retorted Dick, who was of the orthodox school.

"I don't care; and, besides, I *shan't*. It's *mine;* I prayed to God and He gave it to me."

Now, it had never been regarded as quite fair to invoke Divine aid in the winning of a game, and such intervention as this into the natural course of things was altogether unheard of and unexpected.

Dick, at first was so shocked as to be incapable of disbelief, but after a short pause, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder and considerable emphasis, he exclaimed: "You fib; He didn't; it isn't fair"; and as all this was met by a somewhat embarrassed silence, he added: "How did He ?"

Now Mary had always felt herself to be on good terms with the Supreme, good terms based upon an affectionate reverence, and the grateful remembrance of having, through contact with Him, been made to

"feel nice" at the close of more than one turbulent and misspent day. So with a natural reverence she had approached Him on this question of the cannon, although perhaps her mind occasionally felt somewhat uneasy as to the rights of her subsequent possession of it, and the amazing simplicity with which her end had been accomplished.

The simple method had been in this wise. She had tried to state the absurdity of the position—a desirable toy was in the possession of a mere boy of four, only because a stupid uncle could not see that his nephew had no use for the destructive thing, whereas his niece, living in the new age of Woman, was dying to possess it.

This absurdity the Deity must surely understand. Really appropriation was the most natural thing in the world, but after all this desirable weapon *did* belong to the unappreciative Dick, and the rules of the game must be played; so that some authority other than her own must give it to her.

Mary, on thinking it over, decided that the parental view of the situation might be unduly biased by a regard for the wishes of the uncle, who after all belonged to one of them. No, the parents could not be trusted, but God, on the other hand, could.

" Please God, come and tell me *if You don't want me to have it,*" she whispered, awestruck.

That night was an uneasy one, broken by anticipations of a heavenly vision, and an unusually sharp realisation of those frequent little noises common during the small hours in a room of a house that was not built yesterday or the day before.

But morning broke at last, and no forbidding

Voice had spoken to her. The cannon was clearly hers, and that on the highest authority, and Mary, after an uncomfortable night, felt she had earned it.

"He didn't come at all," she said in answering Dick's question—"How"? "Not for one minute. So He *does* want me to have it."

It is not surprising that at first Dick was nonplussed, for his theological views were not extensive, and such as they were they coincided fairly closely with those of his triumphant sister.

But before he submitted a fearful battle raged about that cannon.

His mind was filled with a burning sense of injustice. Mary should *not* have the cannon! True, he didn't want the silly thing, but it was *his* and his alone. What right had Mary, or any allied authority to take it from him? Could this transfer of his own property take place in the middle of the night, while he slept, unconscious of covetous designs?

It was "beastly mean," it was nothing short of theft! And yet it was *not* theft. Mary had not "bagged" the thing she had coveted. It seemed to him, though he could not have put his feelings into words, that the method she adopted, though drastic, was legitimate. He never seriously doubted that. It was in accordance with the simple faith of both children. Besides, although it had never been thought of before, perhaps he might find a use for the method himself another time.

As he had never appreciated the cannon, perhaps he would be well advised to allow the claim, trusting for repayment when a fitting opportunity should occur. Perhaps even pence and toffee might come within the scope of this ingenious invention.

But now? No, he would not give in—at least not without a struggle. So, worsted in an attempt to frustrate his sister by argument, he had recourse to arms.

Seizing an Indian club which lay in the corner, he gave chase. Mary fled. Round the nursery table the angry children ran! Pants and puffs and exclamations of wrath or defiance added such zest to the chase that the bone of contention became an unimportant detail. The fun was worth many cannons. Round and round they fled, scattering the table cloth and all its adornments upon the floor. The hunt became a steeple chase with several jumps, and a waterway of ink to be negotiated.

And then . . . Dick inadvertently decapitated Mary's favourite doll. An over ardent spectator of the chase, with perhaps a fortune at stake, she had fallen across the course to her final undoing. She was so undone, in fact, as to take her place in history with Judas. But then, dolls are notoriously excitable, and frequently lose their heads.

The flying feet stopped, pursuer and pursued stood silent beside the corpse, till Mary, finding this last strain upon her emotions too great to be borne in silence, began to cry.

Dick was unnerved. This was too awful for anything. That beastly cannon had been the cause. . . . Mary should have it. He brought it to her; she would not look at it. He pressed her to have it; she merely sobbed over her departed friend. He implored, and began himself to whimper, till finally, mid flowing tears, she consented to accept the awesome thing.

So the high Authority already held by Mary for

her possession was endorsed by that of Dick, although the normal rate of firing was, in the strife, reduced to the paltry figure already recorded.

Despite this mutilation, however, Mary associated that cannon for many years in her mind with those she had seen in the Tower which had been captured in bloody battles.

Chapter II.

Cupid.

Dick, be it said, was no Adonis. His eyelashes were unromantically short. His face was pale, and, to be honest, plain. The nose was slightly tilted heavenward, and was set above a narrow upper lip and a firm if full-sized mouth. The chin had character, and the forehead was sufficiently high, being crowned with a mop of darkish hair, which had merely the suggestion of a curl. But the secret of his charm lay in a seductive dimple and in his eyes. Big grey eyes they were, which did him splendid service throughout his whole career, bringing him many of the good things that might otherwise have passed him by, and in maturer years than these, no little portion of the love of women. Also in these days his flesh was as soft as that of Naaman, and eminently kissable.

As to his general appearance, he was usually dressed in one of those knitted green jerseys which have knickers to match. Beneath these were long brown socks, which left nicely turned, if frequently dirty, knees open to the public gaze. Stout brown shoes and a tasselled cap of green completed his costume. Thus clad, he made a lithe, attractive figure, familiar to and loved by a large circle of

acquaintance, which ranged from the fat little old woman in a neighbouring baker's shop to the local vicar, who had more than once been puzzled by perplexing, penetrating questions as to the nature of this world and the world to come.

It has been hinted already that at the age of five the military spirit had strong hold upon Dick. But the change which caused him to cast aside his longing to be a corduroy-clad, door-slamming porter in favour of a desire—afterwards fulfilled—to fight for king and country, was naturally drastic. It began at "the pictures." He was taken there by Nurse, after displaying, it must be admitted, considerable reluctance. Indeed, his capture was regarded by her as somewhat of a triumph. The nursery table was set against the centre of a wall. When the time for preparatory dressing arrived, Dick was in the midst of a fascinating game not unconnected with a slipper and the destruction of flies. After such a pastime, Bunyan's Pilgrim seemed an uninteresting character, even though his experiences were to be illustrated on a cinematograph. So, at the approach of Nurse, Dick dived for the table. Underneath it, with his back to the wall, he felt he had at least a temporary security.

"Master Dick," came the familiar tones, "it's time to get ready."

Master Dick, limpet-like, hugged the wall ; but he was discovered. Nurse, scenting no danger, approached the table, and before her hand could grab it, Master Dick's foot had administered a kick upon her shins, and had been promptly withdrawn. The indignity of this was greater than the hurt—for Dick was only five—but this fact was present to the mind of Nurse

who attempted a flank movement on the left. Ere she bent down again, however, her sense of injury was further increased by a repetition of the manœuvre on the part of her assailant. At the renewed success, the heart of Dick beat high, and tasting the sweets of victory, perhaps even then he laid the foundation of his martial career. Also he was enabled to verify the oft repeated statement which had served as an excuse for sending him on several errands, and which it had hitherto been considered improper to investigate, namely, the truth that Nurse had a bone in her leg. His growing confidence, however, was the cause of his undoing, and the next encounter—a more wary one—saw the triumph of his would-be captor.

Thus he came, vanquished and dispirited to witness Christian's toilsome pilgrimage.

The City of Destruction frankly failed either to please or to terrify Dick, for the "sulks" were still upon him. But the solitary figure of the traveller on his way arrested his attention.

"Nurse," he whispered loudly, "what's that bundle on his back, what's it made of?"

"Ssh!" was the reply, "he's just going to tell you."

The lecturer—a raw young curate—turned his attention to the figure on the screen.

"And now boys and ahem! girls, see poor Christian toiling along his—er—weary way, weighed—oh! tut, tut—I should say *bowed*—yes, bowed down beneath his burden of sin. . . ."

Here, Dick, his interest thoroughly aroused, disgraced himself. "But what's *inside* it?" he asked loudly.

This question was as unexpected as it was

pertinent. The timorous lecturer racked his brains in search of some imaginative miracle of explanation, and, signally failing, had recourse to subterfuge.

"Ah, my little boy"—benign and hesitating this—"it is–er–indeed good cause for regret that the prophet –er–or rather our friend Bunyan, did not in so many words define the constitution of that bundle, but"—here he came to safer ground—"can we doubt that it was comprised of all manner of evil. . . ."

But Dick felt that if the prophet Bunyan had not dogmatised upon the nature of the bundle, he, Dick, would not get much satisfaction out of the timid lecturer.

"Silly man," he muttered, "I don't believe he knows. . . . Nurse, was it a monkey like Aunt Susan says I have on my back sometimes ?" This was a sore point with him, and Aunt Susan was named with infinite scorn. These interfering aunts who claim parental authority over other people's children !

After this the crass ignorance of the lecturer upon so vital a point, as displayed in his clumsy evasion of the issue, disgusted at least one small member of his audience, and Dick turned his attention to his neighbour—not his nurse. She was a little child of four, and as fair as a lily. She had watched the questioning Richard with big blue eyes, which showed something of awe at his audacity, and something of pride that one so near her in age should raise his voice in altercation with the lecturer. Obviously, this was a boy to be noticed—and she was noting him when he, in his turn, directed his attention upon her.

At such a tender age formal introduction is frequently omitted. In this case it took the form of

"Little boy—I like you." Dick was abashed, blushed, and said: "What's your name?"

"Molly."

"Molly?—mine's Dick."

"That's a nice name"—pause, and then, "Do you often get a monkey on your back?"

"Of course not—not often; only when Mary's a beast or I have to eat milk puddings, or——"

"Who's Mary?"—a little anxiously.

"My sister, she's got a cold—d'you like sweets?"

"Umm!" The sound was indistinct, but the nod of the head was emphatic.

Dick wriggled from his seat and dived into his trouser pocket, and after some difficulty brought out a tangled piece of string.

"That's not sweets," said Molly, by this time considerably interested.

"Yes it is, only they're dreadfully hard to get out—there it is." By pulling the string an attached lump of paper and toffee was extricated.

He holds it out proudly to her, and her firm small hand takes hold. . . .

"See," says the lecturer, "how terribly sticky it is."

"He can see us," Dick whispered.

"Poor Christian finds it hard work to get out," continued the curate.

It is the Slough of Despond and not good sticky toffee that is causing the Pilgrim such difficulty. Nevertheless, the remark would have been every whit as apt had it referred to the unappetising mixture which they proceeded to divide between them.

"It is sticky, isn't it?" said Molly.

"Yes," said Dick, and they munch.

"My fingers are all stuck together," he said.

"So they are," answered Molly, and a prolonged pause ensued.

"My mouth's all sticky, too," was her next remark. A shorter pause, and : " So it is," he replied.

"Master Dick, what are you doing, come and sit this other side of me this minute. You're a naughty ill-mannered little boy, and ought to be ashamed of yourself." Whereupon, he found the formidable obstacle of nurse between himself and the sticky-mouthed Molly.

. . . . . .

Dick was morose, Nurse obdurate, Molly unapproachable, and Dick grew more morose. His mind dwelt upon the inconsiderateness of fate, upon the inconvenience and senselessness of nurses, and upon the desirability of little girls with flaxen hair and big blue eyes.

He must somehow get a glimpse of that small delightful person from whom nurse divided him so effectually.

Dick resorted to guile. His hand extricated a sticky fragment from his aforesaid trouser pocket.

"Nurse, dear," he said, "What a *nice* picture, isn't it ? " and his arm went round the waist of "nurse dear" as far as it might.

She, complacent at this unwonted and unexpected submission to her authority, turned with a kindly answer to him.

Tap, tap, went the toffee in his hand upon the centre bar of her chair back.

The Pilgrim at this moment was being armed before his entry into the Valley of the Shadow.

"What's he having those things put on for?" asked Dick, with admirable calm, considering the violent thumping of his heart. He wondered that the sound of that tender organ did not drown his question.

Tap, tap, went the toffee softly.

"He's going to fight dragons," said nurse, as a small hand met Dick's and, with a sticky pressure, took the toffee from him.

"Oh," said the boy, "I *am* glad." So he truly felt as he munched more toffee, and a sense of companionship stole over him in the eating of it.

Feeling thus momentarily content, his thoughts returned to generalities. How dull it was to have a nurse! How splendid it would have been if he had been born a knight of old, setting forth in such armour as Christian wore to slay foul fiends who held Molly captive in some high-walled dungeon. Giant Despair and the whole horde of demons in the Valley of Death—he would have faced them all as valiantly as Christian—for Molly!

Chapter III.

Mars.

Now Dick was blessed with imagination, that wizard of children's games, and the next morning he announced that he was Christian, brought up-to-date, and that very morning he was going into the garden to kill dragons and "*spill their black blood.*"

Thus was the coming of the "military spirit," and it began at "the pictures."

For some days he talked of his conquests in remote places of the garden-world, till his father, who, in a quiet way, adored his son and heir, bought him a gorgeous suit of armour mounted on cardboard. True, the resemblance between this and Christian's armour was not too apparent, but it served admirably, and Dick became doubly martial. In fact, he became aggressive.

The boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall was never too nice in his manners. He had not sufficient respect for Dick's years, and jeered openly at the notion, and indeed at the person, of Nurse. Consequently, Dick's heart was sore—torn between a chivalrous desire to defend his stalwart protector and rage at the affront to his own dignity.

If fine feathers do not make fine birds, they sometimes create a spirit of fine confidence in those who wear them. Dick, in his armour, felt invincible.

He would challenge the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall to mortal conflict.

This illicit joy was arranged for an early day at the hour at which slumber usually reigned within doors. When the time arrived, to encourage a somewhat timorous heart, Dick pinned an old white glove of his mother's on his breast. It made him feel like a knight of the chivalrous age, and did not get in his way overmuch. With shining helmet and breastplate, and a sword of lath, he advanced to the appointed battle ground.

No enemy was in sight. Dick was undecided as to the proper mode of procedure.

"Halt!" he cried, "Stand forth!" But no one accepted his invitation. Emboldened, he clambered up the well-worn wall on to some sheds which lined his rival's encampment. He looked around him, and there, behind some shrubs, lurked his foe. With a flourish of his wooden weapon, Dick essayed to advance, looking a war-like, small, lithe figure. But lo! something struck him, and he felt a trickling down his face. Od's boddikins, this must be blood; he must be wounded unto death; was he about to fall in the line of battle? He staggered in the face of death—"it would be an awfully big adventure." How exciting his epitaph would be—"Richard the beloved son . . . killed in the battle of . . . "

He put his hand to his forehead to staunch the wound and to see *how* red was the blood which was making its way down his neck to his no small discomfort. He looked. It *wasn't* blood—it wasn't even red—it was *water*—how ever did . . .

Another volley cut short his meditation. The boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall was en-

trenched behind a bucket and a garden syringe; which after all was scarcely fair. No knight in all the wide wealth of Mother's stories had ever used such tactics. So unusual a fight could surely be abandoned without dishonour. A further deluge solved the question.

"You beastly coward," Dick said, disappearing, "I'll *kill* you some day."

This episode tended to damp his martial spirit, as without doubt it damped his garments. But his armour had at least preserved his jersey from an outward show of moisture, his face was easily dried, if not cleansed, by his crumpled handkerchief, and "Nurse can't see I'm wet inside," he said to himself consolingly, as, disgusted and dispirited, he sought Mary in another part of the garden.

The two children before long were deep in a bag of pink and white cocoanut chips. If any superior person has till now vaguely wondered why these delicacies belong always to the distant days of childhood, and are never seen in respectable adult society, Dick may enlighten him.

"Don't think much of these," mumbled Mary, whose mouth was well-nigh full.

"I do," returned her brother—whose penny had been thoughtfully expended in this direction—"anyhow, you get an awful lot for a penny." So he vanquished the doubt which lurked in his heart concerning the merits of cocoanut chips.

They were sitting in the garden, having toiled at those particular beds of mustard and cress, nasturtiums and the rest which were their own peculiar possessions. Naturally there was a healthy rivalry between the two.

A well-intentioned friend had been there the day before, and, while helping to sow their seeds, had bade fair to sow dissension between them. Being brotherless herself, she had mistaken the children's bickerings for signs of inherent evil, and had accordingly offered to Mary, as the elder child, a bribe for good behaviour.

"If you are very good," she had said, "and don't tease Dick at all till I see you, I'll give you some beautiful seeds for your garden."

Fervently, and for the first time, Mary yearned for her coming.

The promise had, of course, been made in privacy, apart, but after a lapse of nearly four and twenty hours Dick was aware of an uneasy feeling that something very deep must be afoot because of the unprecedented amiability of his sister.

She was swinging in a hammock discontentedly, wondering whether a quarrel and even blows were not better than many seedlings. She would have pleased an artist as she hung there mid-way between the green of a sturdy tree and of the grass beneath her. The short pink frock made an attractive splash of colour. Her face, too, would make the artist pause. The features were clear cut, forceful yet dainty, and her complexion beautifully clear. Her hair, which was thick and curly, was dark like Dick's, and her eyes, set beneath good eyebrows and a broad forehead, were greyish blue. Personality was there, and full-fledged she would possess considerable charm, and be impossible to gainsay. Her ears were tiny and perfect.

Dick was sitting near by on the grass with knees to chin and fingers locked around his ankles.

"Do you always ask God to make you good ?" he asked suddenly.

"Of course I do : why ?"

"Did you last night ?"

"Yes."

"Well, He's done it !"

The astonished certainty which characterised this remark made Mary feel that she was thrust upon the very horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, it seemed grossly unfair that for her self-imposed restraint she, Mary, should not have the entire credit, yet on the other, could she give Dick the true reason of her new-found saintliness ?

Before she had decided the question, came another bomb.

" Do you like being good ?"

As he propounded his proposition, Dick looked so serious—"he's got on his far-away face," she thought—that Mary knew not how to deny.

"Oh, of course," she said. There was no certainty about this, but she added, "it's only little boys who . . . "

"Hooh ! little boys," shouted Dick, jumping up, flushed in the face, his eyes bright and dancing with excitement, and his whole attitude expressive of a steadfast resolution.

"D'you know what I'm going to do ? I'm going to ask Him to make me very naughty—and see if it isn't much more fun !"

Do you like being good?

Chapter IV.

Lessons: Their Trials and Compensations.

As a direct result of getting "wet inside," Dick, the next morning, was made to keep his bed. As a concession to an invalid it was the custom for the children on such occasions to choose what they would have for breakfast. This always made a slight cold a thing to be desired rather than a cause for commiseration. Dick chose an egg, poached on hot buttered toast.

Mary, feeling mildly jealous, therefore went as usual to her lessons—with the vicar's daughters half a mile away. That day she stayed to lunch at the vicarage, an honour which, perhaps, she did not appreciate as she should have done. It was the afternoon for Scripture lessons, and it happened that in the course of it the subject of Prayer was discussed, and its potency illustrated by sundry examples of fiction and of fact.

Suddenly a sickening chill stole over the heart of Mary, an indefinable but fearful dread seized her—was it merely a cold that had given Dick a poached egg for breakfast, or was it a judgment descending upon him in consequence of the audacious experiment

he had proposed the night before? Was Dick, dear little Dick, going to become a frightful example for the edification of future generations of Sunday School children? Was he even now succumbing before some unheard-of ailment which would take from him for ever the desire for poached eggs and toast?

How terribly long that lesson seemed! Would it never end? What would she not give if only Dick would get well? She would never tease him again—would never even irritate him. She would be his willing slave for ever, if only his recovery were assured.

At last the bell of freedom rang, and she started homeward with flying feet and hammering heart. But a quarter of mile from home she pulled up. What would she find when she got back? Would there be darkened windows and a deathly stillness? Would Dick have died a death of which she alone knew the true inwardness?

The gripping fear most keenly felt in childhood in connection with the possibility of death to anyone dearly loved, which so excites the morbid in a child's imagination, and which often is totally unsuspected by the more practical adult—this held Mary and made her heart stand still. Slowly now, and fearfully, she lessened the distance between her and the source of her anxiety.

At last she reached the garden, hoping that he might have been allowed out of doors. In turn she visited each of Dick's favourite retreats, only to find no sign of him. With leaden footsteps she turned to the house. At any rate, the blinds were up—a breath of thankfulness—but was Dick suffering in the body for the sins of his spirit?

Within doors, however, all was cheerful as usual.

Dick, she learned, was well and with Mother and a friend in the drawing room. Whither she went, after the usual cleansing process deemed necessary by older and more ridiculous people.

She discovered the trio at tea, Mother bravely making conversation, Dick intensely observant—of the friend who, in consequence, was palpably ill at ease. She was a spinster of doubtful age, certainly on the wrong side of forty. A plain face, somewhat stern and set, was chiefly notable for several hirsute tufts on the upper lip.

"Why, you're like a daddy," Dick was saying as Mary entered.

There was an awkward pause during which Dick was brought exceeding close to Mother, who, with unusual effusion, presented Mary to the friend, who, in her turn, looked at the new arrival as if to see what might be expected from this other quarter.

The diversion was most timely, and for the moment all was well.

"Mary, dear," said her Mother, "Your dress is not very tidy, come here and let me do it up."

The child crossed the room, and the necessary operation allowed Dick to get free. He gravitated towards the spinster, from whose face his gaze had not been removed since his last remark. He rested his hands on her lap, and said in most confiding tones:

"I want to touch it."

Just then Mother found the hook on Mary's dress unusually troublesome. "We must get nurse to alter this for you, dear," she said, and then, hastily,

"Dick."

"I want to touch it," came the small voice again.

The spinster, looking supremely uneasy, made a trite remark about the weather. Dick's Mother, her lip quivering, answered as naturally as she could. It was difficult for her immediately to dismiss Dick; such a course would amount to an admission that she had overheard his ill-timed remark.

The visitor was just exhibiting those little intimate indecisive movements by which a woman indicates the imminence of her departure, when Dick again broke the silence.

"I want to touch it," he repeated.

"Then touch it and have done with it, you rude little boy," said the spinster, stooping suddenly down with a ferocity that sent Dick flying to his Mother's arms.

It was not long before that visit terminated.

"Mother, *will* Miss Annabel go to heaven when she dies?" inquired Dick, when peace was restored once again.

"Why, yes, dear, I'm afraid she's much more likely to go there than some little boys unless they learn to behave themselves."

"She won't look very nice as an angel, will she?" commented Mary.

"Oh! but my darling, she will look quite different, and will be wearing . . ."

"A crown?" suggested the maiden.

"Yes."

"And white robes?" asked Dick. Mother thought so.

"And wings?" said Mary.

"Yes, dear," replied her embarrassed parent, who began to think she might as well conjure up a sheep as a lamb.

"Do all angels have white robes?" was Dick's next question.

"Why, yes, dear, they are all 'arrayed in white robes'."

"What an awful lot of washing there must be," said Mary, eminently practical.

The topic was not pursued, for Mother found that it was time for her to hurry in order to keep an urgent engagement.

Mary, however, had not yet forgotten the perturbation of feeling she had endured during the earlier part of the day.

It was scandalous that after all her mental suffering Dick should have recovered so completely that neither his cold nor his breach of good manners should have the smallest ill effect upon him. Why should this horrid little boy not show *any* sign of distress when the whole afternoon had been made a misery to herself because of his experimental daring? Should he not in all justice be stricken with at least a temporary affection of his digestive organs, or one crumb or two might go down the wrong way?

The universe was clearly run on impossible lines!

And then she remembered that this very thing—Dick's complete safety—which now seemed so grossly unfair, was that for which her generous, panic-stricked soul had but an hour ago been passionately longing. Now she had got what she wanted she felt she would have been better pleased if her desire had been fulfilled in rather less unstinted measure.

These, or similar, thoughts had partially occupied her mind during the meal, which broke up in some-

what electric atmosphere, and after her Mother's departure she reverted to the subject.

"Dick," she said, "*how* do you feel?"

"All right," he replied, "Come and see my rabbits, they've got some new babies."

"Then you'd better not go near them or the mother will eat them all up," replied Mary the worldly-wise.

"Glad my Mother doesn't eat *me* up when people come to see me," Dick answered.

"Perhaps she will if you're so very naughty."

"I'm not naughty—and, anyhow, she wouldn't, because she'd be hung afterwards."

"Then you didn't pray God to make you naughty after all?" said Mary, in injured tones.

"No," Dick murmured, "I was very tired after my battle—and," he added, "I can be naughty enough by myself if I want to!"

Manifestly feeling virtuous by reason of the restraint he voluntarily put upon any natural inclination towards evil, Dick led the way into the garden, in order to obtain at least a distant view of the newborn family in the rabbit hutch.

He was conscious of the fact that it would be exceedingly interesting to see *how* the mother disposed, as tradition had it that she did, of her young, should his curiosity bring about such a disaster.

Mary, however, went off by herself. The day had not run smoothly for her. She was feeling generally aggrieved. She felt that Dick was something of a fraud, and that he might just as well have shared her strenuous hours at school as have enraged his mother's visitor at home. Even now he was probably enraging the rabbit family.

The truth was, that in addition to Scripture, she

had endured a lesson in geography, a subject, to her, always particularly tiresome. She could summon up no interest in the county towns of England, or in the varying pursuits of their citizens. It was as difficult to find in the name of Newcastle any special connection with coal as to discern in "Northampton" a subtle alliance with boots. On the other hand, that Nottingham in "Notts." made lace she could understand and remember. Of what was lace made but a series of knots ?

This latter method of memorising delighted her until some days later she came sadly to grief when enumerating the staple industries of Cork. Yet, it came to pass, for Mary as for others at her age—and at ages more advanced—that love lightened labour, romance brightened even geography.

Mary sat, as has been said, at the feet of the vicar. Besides his daughters and the few other children with whom her work was shared, there appeared shortly after the events just related, a boy, who, for his sins, was committed to the vicar's care, unusually late in life. That is to say, the age of the boy had, perhaps, reached double figures.

The boy felt his position. It wounded his pride that he should be made to suffer the indignity of learning at such close quarters with mere girls and younger boys, and he thanked Heaven that the experience was to be short-lived. It had added to his chagrin to discover in Dick—now fully recovered—his next-door neighbour ; and on the introduction to the little company of this older and presumably wiser young person, Dick's face had flushed, and his eyes had grown hard as he recognised the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall.

The boy decided that he had never seen Dick before. He was indeed only a new arrival in the neighbourhood, and his acquaintance with Dick was not extensive, and had never been official. His father had made his money in some queer undefined manner, and his stepmother was not a person approved by Dick's mother. Hence the unneighbourliness of Dick and the boy. Hence, too, the already recorded aversion of the boy to nurse. Hence the other things.

Now Mary, on his first appearance, did not recognise the boy. So far from feeling that dislike of which, as Dick's sister, she should perhaps have been instinctively conscious, she was attracted by him—by the sturdy figure, by the mop of pale, very pale hair, by the sparkling eyes, and the almost cherubic mouth that were his. Mary on that particular morning had also a kindred feeling for him—being disgruntled herself. It was then that she had volunteered information as to the products of Cork. That, with similar indiscretions, had entailed detention after school hours.

This detention was shared by the boy, and in the drowsiness of the overworked vicar, opportunity for silent mutual sympathy presented itself, and, being utilised to the full, formed the basis of friendship between the delinquents.

The boy thought that after all girls might not be quite such inferior dolts as he, having no sisters, had, in his ignorance, always considered them, whereas Mary was quite willing to make the acquaintance of this rather attractive strange boy.

Detention over, conversation became possible, and as, to the surprise of each, their homeward way

was found to be identical, they were soon on good terms. Especially was the boy valuable, as he had learned some priceless mnemonic for remembering the Capes and Bays of England. The rhymes were bad, but then the pair were not over critical.

Not that the boy could be called studious. Alas, no. But he found that such devices saved much toil in the pursuit of knowledge upon which he was unwillingly bent.

It must be confessed that when, at the parting of their ways, Mary found that this was none other than the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall, Dick's mortal enemy, the knowledge was something of a shock to her. She had heard from the servants, who, in common with their class—and other classes—were inclined to gossip, vague rumours as to the enormities of this particular boy. Nurse, for instance, was none too fond of him.

So it came to pass that Mary held her peace as to the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall. Dick, too, found that, despite his cowardly behaviour, the boy—who regarded the water and garden squirt episode as an immense jest—was not so obnoxious upon their remade acquaintance as he expected. The boy gave him sweets. Furthermore, it appealed to Dick, his anger somewhat appeased, that he should be on terms with one of whom the authorities at home disapproved.

Also, Dick was not old enough for it to occur to him that he, as Mary's brother, was a person to be propitiated. The boy's overtures of friendship would have rendered Dick's opinion of his own attractiveness, had he troubled himself to form one, somewhat exaggerated. This thing sometimes happens to

older brothers, who also underestimate the virtues of their sisters. Whereas, in fact, much is forgiven the brother of a pretty sister.

So the boy grew in the graces of the younger Branksomes, in Mary's especially.

Does the following seem preposterous to those who have outgrown their childhood? Yet is it true.

Within a day or two of their release from lessons for what seemed, looking ahead, an endless and glorious vista of holiday, the vicar's small daughters had actually and without doubt both seen and heard a kiss exchanged between Mary and the boy! Such excitement in their little hearts, excitement tinged, perhaps, had they known it, with jealousy, had never been their's before.

They teased Mary unmercifully. Of the boy they were afraid.

Imagine, therefore, their satisfaction when, on the last morning of lessons, in itself a season of excitement, actually a note was discovered with the name of Mary written in a "spider" hand upon it, and inside—shrieks of excitement—seven unmistakable crosses. This had been waylaid in the schoolroom, and was displayed with enthusiasm in the bootroom as they were preparing to leave.

Now it must be admitted that the boy, in the bootroom, was confused, and he hastened with the manipulation of the laces, which insisted upon tying themselves into knots.

His confusion was worse confounded when Mary came in. Her arrival was, however, hailed with jubilation.

"Look," cried her tormentors, "who sent you this?"

Then Mary did something which, in the boy's eyes, made her immortal.

"You're very rude," she said, drawing herself up to her full height. "No lady would do that; it's mine. Give it to me."

Then did the heart of the boy beat high. There was a sudden silence, and Mary, seizing the note, ran from the room.

Yet such are the contradictions of the heart of a maid that she would have nothing to say to the boy on the way home, and when she turned in at the gate of her home, she put out her tongue, and then, with tears on her cheeks, she fled up the drive to the house.

Chapter V.

Toads and Fishes.

It was Sunday evening, a glorious Sunday evening in June ; just such a night as to make an Englishman proud of his country and of its climate. It is so seldom that he has any right to boast of both these things. Usually the former is a source of satisfaction—infinite, insular satisfaction—despite the latter. But to be proud of the Motherland because of the climate is not too frequent an occurrence in this land of ours, and such moments should be seized upon. The memory of them should be hoarded and kept intact—till November. Even then it should be produced only with caution, and on special occasions—when, for instance, an American is the guest of the evening.

For where in the wide world is to be found a match for the perfect summer day in England ? The answer is as hard to find as to tell where is the "demmed elusive Pimpernel." We might ask the same questions—and be told the same lies.

The perfect summer day in England is unmatched and inimitable. Its unexpectedness is half its charm. Every moment of it must be assimilated—for who can tell when its successor shall shine upon us ? The

gorgeous uncertainty of ever seeing such another this side of heaven, makes the one glad day a glorious treasure, the remembrance of which a month of fog could not obliterate.

One of these rare perfect days was drawing to its close. The family, radiantly virtuous within by reason of the radiance without, had vanquished temptation, and had gone to Church. All save Dick, who, since it was past his bed time, was not expected to go, and who, since the glories of the evening attracted him, firmly declined to seek his couch, and none had the heart to compel him.

As usual, when he had a moment of freedom, Dick sought the garden. This was a dear retreat, deservedly loved by both the children. In it properly prim beds blended with a verdant wilderness of hay and blackberry bushes. Great trees, chestnut and elm, poplar and beech, together with a profusion of rhododendrons, defended it from the gaze of the curious.

A pond was there, cool and laden with water-lily leaves.

This was a source of perennial joy to the children. In spring a vast assemblage of toads and frogs kept them busily interested. These would be conveyed, very much *en famille*, to a neighbouring field, seemingly sufficiently far away. But no ! back they would come, dust covered and weary, marching up the garden path like remnants of a victorious army returning to a long lost home. On and on they would crawl, with no jump left in them, and with a peculiarly blank expression in their eyes as of one who feels that the present duty has little to recommend it save that one day, one happy day, it may lead to a better

land. So they come on, until at last they arrive within sight of the glint of the shining water. A spring or two—and plomp! they seek the muddy depths and forget the weary journey and the horrid little humans who, net in hand and eagerness in eye, had snatched them from just such comfort as the present. Heavens! could such gruesome things occur again? With a few swift perfect strokes the tired toad finds the seclusion of a group of reeds—and sleeps!

In summer the pursuits would vary. By reason of the natural perversity which, it seemed to Mary and Dick, came like a disease upon the world, with the putting up of hair, or the continued need for shaving, the chiefest of joys in connection with the pond was forbidden. Paddling was only possible in the absence—the rare absence—of Mother and nurse. But how blissful when the opportunity arose to feel the cool waters on the leg, to feel the mud "squeege" between the toes, perchance to feel a live thing wriggle away, frightened at the curious, hesitating, white things which stirred up so much mud.

Now it so happened that nurse had gone away for a few days to tend her mother, who was ill. Poor nurse had departed despairingly—for her mother was said to be in danger of her life. There is no suspicion that this was a fictitious illness, invented as an excuse for a holiday. "To bury an aunt" may, in certain quarters, be synonymous with "going up to town"—such funerals are usually attended in the gayest garments known to the masculine wardrobe—but in this humble and veracious narrative the cause of absence was a genuine and distressing sorrow. Mary and Dick had wept in sympathy, and nurse's

tears fell faster in consequence—though she would not have had the children's tears unshed.

Nurse's mother, however, eventually recovered, so that without unseemly lack of sympathy, the immediate consequence of her illness as it bears upon this story may be investigated.

Nurse—the watchful nurse—was away, and the children took advantage of her absence as well as any proverbial mice on the cat's holiday.

Thus, with nurse at a sick bed, and the family at Church, Dick was in possession of the garden—and the pond.

He had tasted the joys of exploration, and had discovered America across the wide waters of the shallow pool, in the guise of Columbus. Naval supremacy and the joys of conquest—he drained the cup of this felicity and, a modern Nelson, he won a glorious battle of Trafalgar, stepping, in his eagerness, into the very ocean, and literally beheading the enemy—fine, swaggering bulrushes—with the utmost skill and courage and a stick. Purple irises—more popularly known as flags—served admirably as centres of patriotic enthusiasm, and around these the battle waxed hottest.

After such triumphs he retired for a while to his native shore, and received the plaudits of an imaginary multitude with all the grace and pleasant ease of an emperor. He chatted kindly with the more prominent of the noblemen who greeted him as he stepped ashore. Also he was remarkably generous in acknowledging the considerable aid given him in the hottest of the fight by his ship's crew. But the noblemen, although recognising the valour of these latter, showed that they realised that Dick was the

true hero of the day. If he had not been in command . . . oh! well, he had been there and his country was secure.

Surfeited with honours and applause, banquets and the fellowship of kings—he was presented and knighted, and was given the Victoria Cross—he bethought him of retiring into a quiet country life, and devoting the remainder of his days to less perilous pursuits. Surely he deserved a holiday. He would fish and would catch the biggest prizes which the best stocked lake could provide.

So it was that Mother, on her return from church, found Dick with nether garments wet, deeply engrossed in the patient art. An observer might have remarked a look of proud amusement in the maternal eye as she gazed upon the eager little figure of her son and heir, who, utterly oblivious of all spectators, was endeavouring to catch minnows with the aid of string, a bent pin, and a supply of bread pills.

"Dick," called his Mother across the lawn, "whatever are you doing? You must be soaked through to the skin."

The smile had not left her face, and Dick ran up to her shouting: "Oh, I'm—I'm catching great whales. Only they *just* got off the hook when you came and . . . "

"But, Dick, you know Mother doesn't allow you to stand in the pond, and with your best clothes on too."

"*Everyone* does when they fish," Dick proclaimed, "Daddy *always* does in Scotland."

"Yes, but he has special things for it, and has big high boots to stand in when he's fishing."

"Oh!" said Dick.

. . . . . .

Two days after this little episode Mother was going up to town. Naturally she was giving some attention to her appearance, and was already clad in a "perfectly scrummy" new dress, as the attendant and admiring Mary expressed it.

"You look just like an angel," she averred.

"Do I, darling? I'm rather afraid not," replied the Mother, as she looked at her reflection in the glass. What she saw satisfied her, however, despite the fact that all her feathers were confined to her charming hat.

"And now I want my boots," she added.

A search was instituted for these. Wonderful tall laced boots they were, brown and not long since arrived from Paris. The first uneasy days of the new boots were over, and Mother may be pardoned a little pleasurable anticipation in the thought of wearing boots which were at once comfortable and the "very latest thing."

But, alas, they were nowhere to be found. Their box and their tissue paper were empty, the kitchen and the lower regions were searched in vain—in any case it was unlikely that the boots would be found there, for it would have been sacrilege to clean them with anything less than a velvet pad and the daintiest cream, and their permanent resting place was in Mother's room.

The maid who cleaned them vowed—and truthfully—that she had put them carefully away after her last ministrations.

Mother searched perplexedly behind her dressing table—and came to the window. She looked out and gave an hysterical gasp. "Oh!" she cried, "there's Dick fishing again, and oh!—the *wicked* child—he's wearing my boots."

Now Mother not only "looks like an angel," but she has a sense of humour, and on this occasion it saved her—and Dick. That young gentleman was hailed from the pond and questioned as to his iniquities, the extent of which was plainly put before him.

"You said I must have big high boots to fish in," he murmured, somewhat quaveringly—for Dick was possessed of a conscience—"and Daddy's were too big for me, I couldn't get down into them, and—and yours were all I could find."

Mother went to town in a pair of shoes, and told the story to a bosom friend, who laughed immoderately, and sent some chocolates to Dick.

Chapter VI.

New Friends and Old.

It was breakfast time. Father was deep in his paper, pretending not to be annoyed that no letters had come for him—save things in oblong envelopes which he tried vainly to ignore. Father liked letters and abominated bills. Nice healthy-minded man!

If the truth be told, he received letters in preference to visits from a number of his friends. Mother called him a domesticated creature, and it is certain that he preferred the comfort of his own select family to the multitudinous hospitalities that might have been his.

He was sure of his home and suspicious of the world at large. He loathed people to stare into his garden, and would have built a ten-foot wall all round the estate had not nature provided plentiful protection in this direction.

But letters he loved, and so in their absence he retired to his papers, and protested against the iniquities of the Government. This was a sure sign of ill temper, for Mother well knew—though the world did not—that in secret he thoroughly approved the existing administration, although he liked to pose before the public eye as a "crusted old Tory," in whom abuse, thus directed, was but fitting and right.

Mother, on the other hand, could pick and choose this morning between quite a small pile of letters, and her fingers fluttered happily among the envelopes. Even Mary had a note containing love and constancy from nurse.

"We men don't get *any* letters, do we?" said Dick, and Father's equanimity was restored.

"Well, if you don't get letters, Dick, I've got an invitation for you," said his Mother.

"Who from?" asked the youngster, whose mouth was yellow-marked from recent contest with an egg.

"From Mrs. Dickinson, who lives at the big house near Ghost's Walk. She says: 'It would be *such* a pleasure to my boy and girl if your *sweet* children would come and spend the day with them.' They have been away for a long time you know," added Mother, "and Daddy and I met them when we were abroad in the winter. Mr. Dickinson is not very strong, but Mrs. Dickinson . . . "

Mr. Branksome looked up from his paper . . . .

"Mrs. Dickinson," he said inquiringly, "Mrs. Dickinson? . . . oh, *that* woman! She's home again, is she? Haven't her attentions killed Mr. D. yet? Thank heaven, my dear, you're not a *messing* woman!"

Mrs. Dickinson was, in point of fact, a woman whom the paternal slang admirably described. Always kind, generous and self-sacrificing, she had so small a store of mental stability that she had little enough that she could impart to others. A frail delicate woman, who could have made an "interesting" invalid, she had been called to wait for some years upon an ailing husband, and any reserve of moral strength

had long since been exhausted. She made a point of being pleasant always, with the result that she gushed and simpered, and not seldom in private, poor soul, she wept. Invariably she was exquisitely dressed.

As a simple method of pleasing she adopted the device of extravagant adjectives—irritating habit! Hence the "*sweet* children" and "*such* pleasure" in her invitation.

Now the pleasure anticipated by "her boy and girl" was not of so extravagant a nature as to justify her enthusiasm. In fact, they expected very little but boredom from the visit of the two unknown "sweet children."

"Bet the girl's a silly mess, and anyhow the boy's a beastly *kid*. *Sickening* I call it."

Thus the ten-year-old Dickinson to his small sister, then almost five, who believed everything which her brother said, especially when such emphasis was used as he employed on this occasion.

Neither were the "sweet children" themselves overjoyed at the prospect of going out into the unknown to meet little Dickinsons who might embody a dozen objectionable contrasts to the peace of their own abode.

But stress of previous engagements could scarcely be alleged in their case with any likelihood of credence, and so a day for the visit was appointed, and in due course it arrived.

Mother, who was to enjoy the felicity of some hours of unbroken companionship with Mrs. Dickinson, drove them over to "The Cedars"—the big house near Ghost's Walk—in the dogcart. Jenkins, the groom, sat at the back alone, the difficult question of the front seat being solved by Dick squeezing

between Mother and Mary to whom an unjust etiquette—so Dick felt—naturally allotted the place of honour next to the box seat.

The drive was accomplished without adventure or misadventure. Being broad daylight, Ghost's Walk itself was innocent of fearful apparitions. In it, indeed, was a "crocodile" of some thirty children from a local orphanage, walking demurely hand in hand and marshalled by a severe long-faced gentleman in black. His name was Buller, and as the dog-cart rattled by, he saluted Mother with the deference due to a subscriber to the Homes.

"How hot their hands must get," observed Mary; "I shouldn't like to walk like that a bit."

"No," said Mother, "I'm afraid they don't have very happy lives. We ought to be very thankful . . ."

"Mother," Dick interrrupted, "is Mr. Buller the father of all those children ?"

A suspicious gurgle was heard from Jenkins' direction. In fact he grinned so broadly that one of the small boys in the procession, thinking it to be a smile of derision, disgraced himself by pulling such a face as to secure the promise—afterwards redeemed—of proper retribution from the observant Mr. Buller.

Meanwhile Mother assured Dick as to the relationship subsisting between the worthy man and the orphans, and a turn of the road brought them to "The Cedars." As they waited at the door, the children saw Jenkins returning home and wished heartily that the time had come for their own departure. They were soon ushered into the drawing-room, and, after a brief interval, Mrs. Dickinson came to greet them.

"Ah, there you are! How nice of you to come,

Mrs. Branksome. And the dear children too! How do you do? Well, little girlie, how are you? And you, little man, how are you—not too big to be kissed yet I hope! My darlings are in the garden and have been looking forward so much to seeing you; would you like to go out to them—I'll take care of Mother for you."

"I think we should like to go very much, thank you," said Mary, in her best society manner. She usually grew demure with strangers, and the fluttering Mrs. Dickinson, so different from her Mother, did not tend to put her at her ease.

"Shall I stay with you?" whispered Dick to Mother.

"No, dear," she whispered back, "you go with Mary," and "I'm sure you'll have a lovely time," she added, squeezing his hand encouragingly.

So Mrs. Dickinson led them to the French window which opened on to the garden. "Bob! Molly!" she called, "Come, your little friends are here."

When she saw them coming—none too quickly—she turned to Mrs. Branksome, and together they sought comfortable chairs in the room, and started to discuss the weather, the latest happenings of the neighbourhood, and their children.

"At times I'm so anxious about my darlings," Mrs. Dickinson confessed, "I think a Mother has such a great responsibility, don't you, dear Mrs. Branksome? And especially I, since my husband has been an invalid."

And so she poured into the kindly attentive ears of Mrs. Branksome all the history of her children. What illnesses they had gone through; how great a wrench it had been to her to go away with her sick

husband and to leave them behind ; what progress Bob was making at school, from which an epidemic of chicken-pox had brought him back somewhat earlier than he had dared to hope ; what were her hopes for him and his future ; what prodigies of valour and what intellectual triumphs she felt justified in expecting of him.

Of her small Molly too, she talked ; of her sweet ways and quaint sayings. She told a story, somewhat anxiously, of how Molly had returned some months ago from a picture show telling how she—a child of four—had sat next to such a "nice little boy, Mummie, who gave me toffee and kissed me. And I love him very much," she had added. Molly had a constant little heart.

Mrs. Branksome laughingly confessed she had never before heard of such premature love at first sight—a dim sight at that, considering the circumstances—and she wondered who the "nice little boy" could have been.

Meanwhile, in the garden, the four children were making, or renewing, acquaintanceship, as occasion demanded.

"You're Mary Branksome, I suppose, I'm Bob," said that young gentleman, "how do you do ? "

"Quite well, thank you," replied Mary, rising to the occasion and taking his hand. "This is my brother, Dick."

"How d'you do ? " said Bob shortly, with a nod in Dick's direction.

"This," he added quaintly, "is my sister Molly."

"How are you ? " Mary said. She shook the small hand, and then, after a momentary pause, kissed the fair little face of Molly.

Dick had neither opened his lips nor taken his eyes off Molly since he recognised her as "my little girl," as he had always mentally called her. He had never said a word concerning her at home. He had never seriously considered the possibility of seeing her again. She had suddenly been found by his side on that historic evening, and as suddenly, after the lecture, had vanished from his view. Nurse, who disapproved of early love making, had seen to that.

But here she was again. He was to play with her all the afternoon. She was one of the two whom he had been frightened, yes—there was no use mincing matters—frightened of coming to see in their own house. Frightened of Molly! What a nice little girl she looked and how very pink her cheeks were!

Molly came shyly up to him as the other two walked away.

"How are you to-day—Dick?" she said, holding out a chubby hand. "I didn't know you were you."

"Neither did I," he replied, his tongue unloosed, "at least I didn't know you were you!"

"Well, I am," said Molly, "and I'm very glad. Are you glad too?"

"Yes," he rejoined quickly. "I wish I'd got some toffee."

"Oh, haven't you," said the disappointed Molly. "I thought you'd *always* have some in your pocket."

"Wish I had," Dick answered. "I haven't had any for ages."

So the two children found themselves together once again and wandered off among herbaceous borders.

It was all a very serious and interesting matter. Quite as wonderful, quite as serious and important as any reunion of maturer years. What did it matter that Dick was not yet six—Molly was not yet five. Platonic friendship and sociological problems were not the topics of conversation, but toys and toffee—the latter especially, perhaps—could bind a compact of affection quite as well as sterner matters. Vast distances and great adventures had not divided them, but the meeting was none the less wonderful to them.

> I did not know that you were you.
> It's scarcely credible—but it's true!

Such was the tenor of the thoughts of each of them, and they were happily content and childishly withal.

Presently all four were thoroughly enjoying themselves, each astonished at the success of an afternoon of which they had expected very little. At first they were sedate, and Bob, as master of the ceremonies, took them round the place, showing them its principal attractions, not failing to point out the glories of the fruit garden. Anything that was on the ground they regarded as lawful prey. If a considerable amount of fruit reached terra firma in the course of the afternoon, who shall attach blame to any but the kindly wind that blew?

Gradually the atmosphere grew less constrained—the kindly wind again perhaps—and they indulged in hide-and-seek, that best of games for old and young. Bob, as became the host, was "he." After an appointed interval he went in search, and ere long found Mary squatting behind a bush. With a cry and a laugh she ran, but was caught and taken "home" in triumph.

Among Herbaceous Borders

Another five minutes failed to reveal either Molly or Dick. It seemed to Bob altogether absurd that both should have found hiding places—he took for granted there were two—so remote and inaccessible. Mary was called in to help. Even their joint efforts, however, went unrewarded for a considerable time, until at last they found both the absentees tucked, stiff but contented, in a butt which contained three inches of water to which they had been heroically indifferent.

"It was fwightfully hard to get in," Molly lisped in her excitement, "and we couldn't *possibly* get out."

"My leg's all prickly," said Dick.

But they both seemed wonderfully complacent, despite the trying predicament from which they had been rescued.

"Its a wonder you weren't drowned," observed Bob. He had passed that water-butt three times in the course of his search, and had not thought of looking inside it until Mary had suggested the experiment. Consequently Bob was, for the moment, feeling ill-used.

Later in the afternoon, having exhausted both energy and imagination, they found themselves near a group of outhouses, which were at the top of a field adjoining the garden. Here was the kennel of a black collie dog of somewhat vicious temperament, who had recently given birth to a litter of pups.

So at a respectful distance the four children stood looking into the kennel, trying to obtain a glimpse of its new inhabitants. Gyp growled and they grew yet more respectful. But their few additional steps backwards did not suit the temper of the dog, and, with a savage snarl, she sprang out of her kennel.

The children separated and fled, into the house, up some steps into a loft, into the garden and into the field close at hand. This last course Dick chose—or found himself being borne thither by flying feet. After him Gyp gave chase.

In later years, when entering for a sprint, Dick used to try and imagine that Gyp was after him.

Terror unadulterated lent speed to him, or he would never have crossed the field and stumbled up the fence as he did ten feet ahead of the infuriated dog. Never to his dying day will he forget the sight of the animal stopping and turning sullenly upon her track, as he saw her from his safe retreat on the fence. Always he will feel an instinctive shiver if a yapping dog is near him.

His legs were as water when they took him off the fence. Mother, pale and agitated, had rushed from the house when the frightened Molly had sought the drawing-room.

"Gyp's after Dick and is going to eat him," she had said.

Dick was the hero of the hour.

"By Jove, you *can* run," said Bob, generously appreciative of the "kid's" efforts.

"Gawd bless my soul," said a groom who had rushed to the rescue, in confidence to the cook, "I never saw anyone run as fast as that there kid in all my born days."

Dick's own remark was characteristic.

"I wonder if Gyp is tired after trying to catch me," he said.

So ended an afternoon which lived in their memories for many a day. When it came to the point, they were sorry to find themselves on their way

home—as sorry as the small Dickinsons were to bid them good-bye. They exchanged many promises for future meetings.

"Well," said Mother, as they swung along the homeward road, "how did you enjoy it ? "

"Oh, ever so much," said Mary.

"And what did you think of Bob and Molly ? "

"Molly and I are going to be married," said Dick.

Chapter VII.

Sandy.

Dick was nowhere to be found. During that restful interval which follows the midday meal, while Mary was performing back exercises, a daily penance which of all things she abhorred, he disappeared as completely as if he had gone off in an aeroplane.

Being a self-reliant young gentleman his absence was not noted until later in the afternoon Mary failed to find him in the house or garden. The stable yielded no better result.

When Father heard of the news he gave an anxious whistle. Then he slapped his thigh and with a laugh said, "I warrant the little beggar has gone over to the Dickinsons. After all he says he's going to marry Molly, so he's only performing a natural obligation. I'll go and fetch him back, if he has got so far already."

This was the obvious solution of the mystery, and it was only when Father returned, striving to hide his uneasiness as he found that the miscreant had not come back during his absence on a fruitless journey, that an organised search was made. Every corner in which Dick might have lain asleep or hurt was visited in vain.

Meanwhile Dick was having "a big adventure."

After his dinner he had, as usual, found his way into the garden, and was presently swinging on the

gate at the end of the drive, itself a winding roadway hidden for the most part from the house.

While thus employed he saw a youngish man—unkempt, unshorn, unwashed, who came striding down the white road carrying a bag in which was obviously a live thing. He stopped near to the swinging Dick to light the remnant of a cigarette which had been sheltered behind his ear. He saw Dick was eyeing the bag with interest.

" 'Ullo, young 'un ! " he said.

"Hullo ! " said Dick, pleased to find some one inclined towards conversation. "Please what have you got in that bag ? "

"Wouldn't you like to know ! " said the other, not unkindly.

"Yes, I should," said Dick simply.

"It'll bite you," said the man, swinging the bag in Dick's direction.

Dick, however, was undismayed, and, clambering down, went outside the gate eagerly.

"Please show me," he said, in his most winning tones.

" 'E'd jump out if I was to open it. But I tell you what, if you come 'ome wiv me I'll show it to yer and lots of other animals."

"I don't think I can do that," said Dick, prompted by conscience.

"Does your Mother know you're out?" exclaimed the unkempt one with a chuckle.

"No," answered the guileless Dick. "Yes, she does though, but I'm only in the garden."

"Well, come and see my animals, 'eaps of 'em," urged the untruthful tempter.

"Where are they ? " asked Dick yielding.

"Only round the corner and on a little ways," said the man.

So Dick, overcome by his desire to see the captive in the bag—a plain white ferret—and the "'eaps of others," turned his back on home and duty and trudged along the road with his new acquaintance, talking the while.

"Where do you live Mr. . . . What is your name, please?"

The unkempt one stammered, being by training as by nature cautious of revealing his identity, "My name's—call me Sandy," he said.

"Where do you live, Mr. Sandy?"

"Lor, what a kid it is," confided that worthy to the ferret with much amusement.

"Not *Mr.* Sandy," he added, "just Sandy."

"Well, where do you live, Sandy?" said the persistent Dick.

"Don't live nowhere," returned Sandy with a touch of regret in his voice. "We just moves about."

"But haven't you got a house?" came the next question.

"Well, yes, but we move it about too."

Dick began to think that this was a good opportunity of ventilating a small stock of stable slang which he had acquired, but which was tabooed by the family.

"Lumme," he said impressively, "what a funny house. It would be a *nawful* job to move our house. What a lovely house yours must be."

"Yes it is," said his companion, "You come and see it."

"How much further is it?" asked Dick after they had walked some time in silence.

"Only just round the corner and on a little ways," repeated Sandy.

"But there isn't a corner," said Dick doubtfully.

"Why, you're not tired are you?" exclaimed the man, evading the issue.

"No," said Dick, and on they went, and again silence reigned for a while, Sandy weighing in his mind the possibilities of the situation. He was not an inveterate rogue, but here was a small boy, well connected and well dressed, and of this fact he wished to take every practicable advantage.

Dick, on the other hand, was elated by the new experience, felt himself to be of great importance, as the companion and equal of his adult if unconventional friend, and was not a little pleased at the thought of the effect he could afterwards create at home and elsewhere by recounting, aided perhaps by his fertile imagination, the story of his afternoon's adventure. Deciding, therefore, to glean as much knowledge as possible concerning his fellow traveller, he started to question him again.

"What do you do all day, Sandy ? " he asked.

"Nothink particular," returned Sandy, "just anythink."

"Anythink you like ? " asked Dick, with emphasis upon the "k."

"Yus," said Sandy, who was meditating.

"But isn't there anyone to stop you ? " said Dick.

"No, of course not," returned his companion defiantly, his mind turning instinctively to thoughts —unkindly, bitter thoughts—of the police force.

Dick felt he had suddenly found the true secret of happiness. To spend one's life with none to say one nay—this must be perfect bliss. Could Dick follow

the same delightful course of life when he grew up? Yes, Sandy supposed he could. Dick would remember. What was it called?

What was what called?

The profession of doing nothing—the being something which implied no labour and no restraint, instead of being a gardener, or a coachman, or a postman, or a magistrate. These were the principal occupations which had as yet come within Dick's ken. His Father was a magistrate.

This last piece of information had a disquieting effect upon Sandy, who would never again be excused under the First Offenders Act.

He began to foresee that he might find himself in trouble as a result of his afternoon's companionship with Dick.

So on they went, Dick a little weary with the unwonted length of his journey, Sandy nursing a grievance against the unoffending youngster because of certain unpleasant premonitions which exercised his mind concerning Dick.

Consequently neither was sorry to see in a open meadow by the roadside, a gipsy encampment.

"'Ere we are, young 'un," said Sandy.

Dick was alert in a moment.

"Now shall I see what's in your bag and all the other animals?" he asked.

"You'll see them fast enough," was the reply.

As they drew near the caravans—three in number—Dick eyed them and bravely endeavoured to pretend he was not disappointed.

"Is that your house?" he asked.

"Yes, ain't it a beauty," said Sandy sarcastically.

"Yes," lied Dick.

A dark man looked up at their approach from the primitive cooking arrangements which were engaging his attention.

"'Ere you are at last," he said, taking a blackened clay pipe out of his mouth. "But," he added, pointing to Dick, "What the blazes have you got there ? "

Pray be quiet ! Such is a free—a very free—rendering of Sandy's reply. After all, one mode of expression is as good as another.

"Look 'ere, kid," he went on, "you sit there and keep quiet."

Soon Sandy was lost in a conversation of apparent importance with the owner of the pipe.

Poor Dick felt somewhat startled by this abrupt departure, and began to wish that his love of animals had not brought him so far afield. How long would it be before Sandy would be ready to take him home ? Would he have to wait till that happy time arrived before he got anything to eat ? He regarded lunch as very ancient history. He felt thoroughly miserable. Even the ferret, the cause of all the trouble, was cruelly ungrateful, for when Dick edged his way over to the spot where the wriggling bag had been thrown, his fingers were bitten when they tried to stroke the mysterious prisoner.

This was the last straw, and, brave boy as he was, tears filled his eyes and he looked most woe begone.

For the man who has swallowed poison another poison may affect a cure, and to a brave heart struggling with tears the tears of another will often bring relief.

Dick heard from the nearest caravan a little moaning voice, and the crooning tones of another. There was a quality in this second sound which reminded

him of his Mother's hush-a-by song with which she was wont to comfort him when he was in bed and out of sorts.

Dick stole over to the caravan, and, climbing softly up the steps, he looked in at the open door. It was an untidy place, having none too much air. The principal method of ventilation was by means of a small window open at the end of the caravan opposite the entrance. Other tiny side windows were closed. This home on wheels was so placed that the light of the setting sun shone in through the open window upon the occupants. These were a woman, in age thirty or thereabouts, and a sick child, whose moans had brought Dick thither. The tousled hair of the watching woman surmounted a face that was drawn with anxiety. Neither child nor mother had noticed the quiet approach of Dick.

"Is she very bad ?" he asked.

The woman looked up, astonished by the subdued tone of the question. Her wonder was only increased when she saw the small person who had asked it. Dick, with eyes full of sympathy, and himself utterly oblivious of the incongruity of the picture that he made, seemed to her like a creature of another world. The clean brown face beneath that bobbing tassel of his cap, the neat jersey and his graceful pose, made an impression upon her mind, intangible and unexpected.

"Who are you, and where on earth do you come from ?" she asked.

"My name's Dick, and I came with Sandy," he answered categorically.

"With Sandy ! But what for ?" she asked again.

"I came to see his animals, but he left me outside and"—Dick's own troubles were coming back upon him—"may I come in ? " he said.

"Yes, but hold your tongue. She's going off to sleep," was the reply as the mother bent over her child.

"Is she very bad ? " Dick whispered again.

"Yes, awful bad," the woman said, turning away. What right had this other child to be so well and strong when her own was almost dying ? Why should he be well fed, well dressed, well cared for, and her's . . . ? Why was it that things were so abominably unjust ? Anger and bitter jealousy filled her breast, anger against this stranger child not older, no better than her own, and against the Providence who permitted such inequalities.

She turned again to see the small offender. But she stood still and her anger died away. For Dick was standing at the head of the rough bed on which the sleeping child lay. Habit had made him take off his cap when entering the caravan. The afternoon sun caught the untidy shining hair and made a gleam of light play over it. As the woman turned he bent over the child with small arms stretched out behind him for fear of disturbing the sleeper, and lightly kissed her forehead.

The rough gipsy woman made a blind movement forward and caught Dick—astonished, embarrassed, and none too appreciative of the embrace—to her mother heart as if he had been her own son.

Meanwhile the cooking was proceeding outside.

Sandy and his companion were weighing the merits of the situation. Sandy, proud of his ingenuity,

forgot his misgivings, until the reason for them was strongly pointed out to him.

After some debate, however, it was decided that Dick by persuasion or by force should exchange his own clothes for others—and fewer—of a different texture. It was a pity that small boys swinging on garden gates were seldom overburdened with cash.

Sandy, it was agreed, would then offer to take Dick home on his own horse. This Sandy knew would meet with Dick's approval. At a convenient place the boy should dismount, and would be left to the guidance of fortune to find his way home.

They decided that greater violence would be unwise. Sandy did not, however, impart any information as to the standing of Dick's father in the county, but went straight off in search of Dick.

"The blamed kid's gone," he returned to report.

"Darn fool," said his companion, "he'll have the police after you."

Sandy extended his search. He was genuinely frightened, and cursed himself for a many-hued fool likely to be punished for his folly.

He came in due course to the woman's caravan, and was astonished to see her engaged in whispered conversation with Dick.

"Strike me," he exclaimed, "is that there kid with you ? "

The woman, tiger light in her eyes, came to the top of the steps.

"Yes, he is, and what's he here for at all ? That's what I'm going to know. What's the young game, eh ? " A threatening virago this !

Sandy's universe was topsy-turvy. Here was an unlooked for champion of "the kid."

"Shut your row," was his polite retort, and he glanced at Dick who watched from behind his defender's ample skirt, "come here and I'll tell you."

"If you touch a hair of that kid's head I'll—I'll choke you," she exclaimed with vehemence. But she went down the steps and discussed the situation vigorously.

She elicited from Sandy the plan they proposed to carry through, and vetoed it. She was a person of influence and authority in that company with a sufficient reserve of force, both physical and verbal, to insist upon attention, and Sandy pledged himself to carry out her instructions.

Forthwith both he and Dick were mounted on a plodding nag, Dick's peace of mind restored. Little did he think how fortunate he was still to be wearing his familiar clothes, nor to whom he owed their preservation.

His mind was full of the small invalid in the caravan, and he prattled sympathetically concerning her. Sandy was taciturn, and finally, fulfilling rather the letter than the spirit of his orders, he set Dick down at the last corner before he came into his "own road."

Dick was overjoyed. He forgot his fright and his indignities in the glad prospect of finding himself at home again. So in all good faith he waved to Sandy.

"Good-bye," he said, "I'll tell my Daddy all about it, and he'll bring a doctor and make her quite well again."

Sandy paused before leaving him. He saw how

genuine was Dick's kindly thought, and regretted his own designs upon the boy.

"Good-bye," he said, "and . . . I say, young 'un, I didn't mean to 'urt you."

Then he turned tail, and the plodding beast was made to trot.

Dick, having seen the last of Sandy and his steed, sought the familiar gateway of his home.

Chapter VIII.

The End of an Adventure.

Whilst these great events had been happening abroad, anxiety at home had ripened into action. Dick's fond parents had started off together in the dogcart to scour the country for the renegade. Unfortunately for the success of their search, however, when they came to "the corner," which actually existed, although it was further away than Sandy had originally indicated to Dick, and went "on a little ways," it was in the wrong direction. Although they questioned many, they could get no information as to the movements of the boy, and as they went from place to place unavailingly, their anxiety was not lessened. Their theories regarding his disappearance were many and beside the mark.

Mary, who was not allowed to join the party, sought consolation in tears and the garden for the loss of her brother. She put the whole catastrophe down to the back exercises she had undergone, and pointed out to Jenny, the nursery-maid, that had this form of torment not been in vogue she, Mary, would have known where Dick was, and would have been able to quiet the minds of the whole household.

"You'd have been lost yourself then," Jenny surmised, "so you ought to be very thankful for your exercises."

This was poor consolation. However willing a sister may be to sacrifice herself in a brother's cause, yet it would be a waste of good material to be a martyr merely to share and not to alleviate his fate. Besides, how dreadful for Father and Mother to lose both their children in one afternoon. In some families such extravagance might be afforded, but in their's—no !

So, defeated in argument, Mary had gone out of doors. What could have happened to Dick ? Had some wild animal broken out from a travelling circus, some fierce lion such as she had seen snarling at its keeper, when last a circus had stopped in their neighbourhood ? Her mind reeled as she considered such a possibility, and, childlike, she imagined in detail the hideousness of such a fate.

"The lion having reached his head
The miserable boy was dead."

Of all the alternatives that occurred to her, this seemed the most feasible. She had dismissed the more pleasant theory of Dick's having been snatched heavenwards like Elijah, for his sins—Dick's, not Elijah's—she was sure, were sufficient to have saved him from that. He was not "too good to live." Mary was glad of that, and resolved to take heed lest she herself should fall into so perilous a state.

As for Jenny, she sat in a window overlooking the drive, wrestling with an accusatory conscience as to her sometime treatment of the prodigal, and toying with some needlework which did not advance far that day towards completion.

Thus it was she who first saw Dick slowly advancing up the drive. After he had seen the last of Sandy

it had struck the small offender for the first time since his initial wavering at the gate that his conduct might have caused some anxiety at home. So that he was supremely conscious of a "sinking feeling" at the centre of his person as he neared the house.

Who does not know the sensation, and who knowing will not sympathise with Dick ?

Jenny descended upon him like a whirlwind, scattering to the corners of the earth all her new-formed, fear-prompted resolutions of future gentleness towards him.

"Where *have* you been, you bad little boy?" she said, "Your Father and Mother have gone off to get the police. You'll catch it ! " she prophesied, without, however, further defining the nature of "it" . . .

Dick was borne protesting into the house.

All his sorrow for his sins was repressed before this avalanche of accusation. He had not been a bad little boy, and he would defy the police as, assuredly, he defied Jenny.

He had been prompted by pure unselfishness, had been on a mission of mercy, and was only now returned to bring medical aid to a sufferer.

Thus Jenny might have summarised the wealth of defensive protest which Dick bestowed upon her.

There is no more convincing advocate than the eloquent prisoner convinced of his innocence—and Dick forgot the ferret and the "'eaps of other things" for the moment.

Soon, however, he was established before a bountiful tea table, to which he gave undivided attention for a while. The boy was really hungry. As he finished his meal the sound of horse's hoofs told of the return of Father and Mother. He went down-

stairs, wondering what they would say to him. Would they be angry? Dick braced himself for further defensive tactics.

But Mother had a smile on her face and he was soon enveloped in her arms.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "where have you been? We've been so anxious about you. We thought we had lost our little boy."

"I went to see some animals, but I found a little girl who's *very* ill, and will you bring a doctor?" Dick answered rapidly, wanting to redeem his promise to Sandy.

"But where is it, darling, and who?" asked his perplexed Mother.

"Only . . . only round the corner and on a little ways," said Dick. "At least its rather a long way when you walk."

"On a little ways—where does the child get hold of such expressions," mused his Father, pulling his moustache. He was not a little relieved to see his son back safe and sound, and reprimand seemed out of place.

After some further explanations Mr. Branksome volunteered to go in search of the encampment, being nothing loath to have some words with Sandy. He wondered what had been Sandy's motive in the matter. But on this point Dick was of little service.

Mother insisted on joining him and took with her some delicacies for the sick child.

Dick went as a matter of course, and since his memory was only short when it suited his purpose, he expatiated during the drive upon the size of the menagerie under Sandy's care. Dick was afterwards cautioned as to the moral evils of exaggeration.

When finally they came in sight of the caravans, they saw that active preparations for departure were in progress. On his return, in fact, Sandy had deemed retreat the better part of precaution. After all, Dick's Father was a magistrate.

The sight of Dick's father, therefore, struck terror to Sandy's heart, and he registered a spiteful vow to slaughter a plain white ferret.

The dogcart was drawn up at the side of the meadow, and whilst these two gentlemen were discoursing without, Dick led his Mother to the caravan in which the sick child lay.

The hasty preparations which had followed Dick's going had not softened the gipsy's heart towards the boy, for the move could only bode ill for the invalid; but when she saw him again, the sweet presence of the wonderfully dressed lady, her gentleness and the restoratives she had brought with her, reduced the poorer woman to tears.

"Oh, pretty lady, pretty lady," she reiterated, "my Miriam will be better now, my Miriam will surely be better now."

"Let's come and see the animals," whispered Dick, upon whom the scene began to pall.

So, their merciful errand complete, they went out and called Father to see the menagerie also.

"I'm very much afraid there aren't any animals, little man," he said, smiling down at Dick.

"But Sandy said he had 'eaps," protested the boy.

"Sandy has not so strict a regard for truth as he should have," said the Father as Dick thought the matter out.

"Did he tell a wopper?" he asked.

"Yes, a wopping one," said his parent, descending to the colloquial.

So they came home, Dick having learnt something more of the world and those that dwell therein.

. . . . . .

That night in bed Dick returned to the subject.

"Will Sandy be turned out of heaven for telling me a wopper?" he asked of Jenny, who was preparing to put out the light. Dick was frequently given to conversation at that particular moment.

"Yes, I expect so," said Jenny shortly, anxious to be off.

"Poor Sandy! Then I s'pose he'll be drowned," Dick mused.

Jenny, greatly puzzled, asked why. She had never thought of water being the alternative to heaven.

"Because," said Dick, "Mr. Sykes said there was a great gulf fixed."

Mr. Sykes was the vicar.

Chapter IX.

A Gordian Knot Untied.

The weather was misbehaving itself. The rain was coming down in a deluge and there seemed small chance of its clearing up. This was all the more sad as it was the day on which Bob and Molly were to pay a visit, and all four children were hopeful of the joys the afternoon might hold in store for them.

Bob knew that he would be accorded the respect due to his advanced years, and was, therefore, pleased. Mary enjoyed the rare experience of having a boy older than herself to deal with. Need it be said that Molly and Dick indulged in the pleasures of anticipation? They were to have had a great time in the garden. And it was raining hard and relentlessly!

"I wonder where all the rain can come from," Mary murmured, as they watched it from the nursery window.

"From heaven, of course, silly," said Dick the wise.

"Well, they must get some lovely bathing up there on fine days," reflected Mary.

"I expect the whole swimming bath is being emptied to-day," said Dick, "like Jenkins does the water butt."

"What a big plug it must take to keep in so much water."

"Yes, and they'll never get it in again till all the water is out."

"Then it won't stop raining to-day." With which dismal conclusion Dick was fain to agree.

At this moment Jenny, still in charge of the children in the continued absence of nurse, came into the room. The maid, unable as unused to command, being, if the truth be told, none too ready to obey, did not exercise her authority discreetly. She was too brusque and impatient to gain either the confidence or the affection of the children. Also the knowledge that she so obviously failed to fill the place of nurse, irritated and annoyed her and made things worse.

As a matter of fact, it was no light task adequately to fill that place. The children, especially Dick, held nurse in high esteem. He had once expressed his feelings on this matter to his Mother—"years ago," he would have said scornfully, had he been reminded of it.

"There's only one person I would rather have for my nurse," he had confided to her one evening when she was tucking him up in bed.

"Why, who is that ? " she had asked wondering.

"Well—I hope it isn't rude, dear, but it's a gen'l-man."

Mother was considerably perplexed, but the matter was to Dick so obviously grave that never the flicker of a smile passed over her face as she said :

"A gentleman, darling, tell me who it is ? "

"Well, it's God, dear," Dick had answered, nestling to her bosom, somewhat embarrassed at having made

so intimate a disclosure even to the Mother he loved "most in the whole world."

All things considered, therefore, it was scarcely probable that Dick would find in Jenny all the attributes of nurse. Nor did he.

"Come along," she said, as she entered the nursery. "Don't stand staring there all day, you'll never be ready in time. Master Dick, you go downstairs to the bathroom and wash your hands with a nail brush."

"They're not dirty," said Dick, examining the offending objects.

"Yes they are, they're filthy," said the amiable Jenny decisively.

"Then I shall make the basin dirty and you'll have to clean it," retorted Dick, going down the stairs.

"Never mind the basin, you get your hands clean, you dirty little boy," Jenny called out from the night nursery where she was preparing Mary for the necessary fray with soap and water.

Dick descended as far as the bathroom. He went further—down to ground level and out of the back door unobserved. The rain, which now began to show signs of stopping, had made the most delicious mud on the pathway. Dick rubbed his hands thoroughly in it, and, covered in dirt, he sought the bathroom with an expansive smile.

He then proceeded to get his hands clean at the expense of the basin, about which he was not to mind. This injunction indeed he fulfilled to the letter.

"I don't mind a bit," he said to himself, as he regarded his handiwork. "Jenny's horrid, and I hate her."

Despite his efforts, however, the last state of those hands was worse than the first, and it took the almost vicious industry of Jenny on his return to the upper regions to make them presentable "for company."

Jenny, however, was not an ill-natured girl, and when the "company" arrived she was ready to make herself generally pleasant. She had not yet seen the basin in the bathroom, and, moreover, she professed to find in Bob and Molly evidences of the most exemplary good conduct which she "wished to goodness" her own charges would strive to imitate.

The weather is too frequently the topic of conversation, but it is small wonder that on this afternoon childish maledictions were levelled against it, since it had prevented for the time being all outdoor amusement and had set them the difficult problem of how best to occupy the time.

But the world may come to an end, and gladly, when the inventive genius of children for their own amusement fails. The afternoon was not slow in passing. A fox hunt on the rocking horse, and Waterloo enacted by the aid of tin soldiers and the two-pea-a-minute-firing cannon helped matters. Bob gave an exhibition of the art of catapulting out of the window to the no small inconvenience of the gardener, stooping, despite the rain, over his flower beds. The extinction of a house on fire called for the greatest promptitude and courage. Noah's ark floating on billowy waves of paper in the grate, caught fire mysteriously by the aid of a lighted taper. The fire brigade was summoned, and only by the noblest heroism were the excellent Noah and his family rescued, and by tumbler-buckets of water from the night nursery was his home saved from total destruction.

Even so, it is to be feared that some unusually fine specimens of antediluvian creatures were lost to posterity in the flames. But these things will happen in the best regulated arks.

Thereafter a pause in the proceedings ensued, during which they sat on table, sofa, flóor, swinging their legs or kicking them, trying to devise some further method of entertainment.

"I know, let's have acting," suggested Mary.

"What shall we act?" asked Bob laconically.

Dick scrambled from the floor, his resting place—

"We'll have a wedding," he said, "and I'll marry Molly."

"How do you know she'll have you?" asked Bob again.

"Course I will," said Molly, pink with blushes and excitement.

"All right," said Mary, generously willing to relinquish the principal part which she felt might have fallen to her lot in the "acting." "I'll be chief bridesmaid and hold your bouquet."

Bob thought it was time to assert himself.

"What am I to be?" he asked.

"Oh, you can be best man and—no! you be her father and give her away," said the bridesmaid.

"Right you are," said Bob, mollified by the dignity of the part he was to play. "Come along, we shall have to dress up."

"But who's going to marry us?" asked the bridegroom-elect, intent upon business.

Clearly the father could not perform the ceremony, nor would it be orthodox for the bridegroom to do so. The bride herself might reasonably be expected to have other matters to engage her attention, and the

bridesmaid was not going to sacrifice her position to become parson. No, someone else must officiate.

Jenny! Would she do it? Dick felt it depended greatly upon the extent of her knowledge as to the uncleanliness of the bathroom basin.

But Dick, when he wished to be charming, would have moved the heart of a Jezebel, and Jenny, being sought and found, consented to unite them in matrimony, and forgave the lapse which had omitted the declaration of the banns.

Thus it was that a curious group was drawn up before Jenny, who, despite fervid protestations, had declined to put on a nightdress as suggestive of a surplice.

Molly was arrayed in a white garment suspiciously like a miniature of the rejected surplice. On her head was a bunch of flowers which developed a strong tendency to fall sideways beneath the motor veil, purloined from Mother's room, which failed to hide her blushing satisfaction at the turn of affairs. She carried a brown paper bouquet.

Beside her stood Dick, juggling with a top-hat—Father's best—and decked in the jacket of a paternal lounge suit which served as a very frock frock-coat. The bride's father also had a silk hat, as became his age and station, to say nothing of a stand up collar which likewise stood *out*, being sixteen and a half inches round the neck.

Mary was suitably gowned in a silk cloak, and had much ado in the proper arrangement of the bridal train.

Bob supplied the music on a mouth organ, as he escorted his eager daughter up the aisle to Dick, who, looking preternaturally solemn, awaited his

bride-elect according to instructions—these last being augmented by the proud parent between the bars of the nuptial music.

Meanwhile Jenny was studying the Prayer Book perplexedly, and finding the preliminary exhortation rather long and unnecessary, she went straight to the heart of the matter and sternly demanded of Dick whether he would have this woman—here a guffaw from Bob—to be his wedded wife? Would he do his duty by her "so long as they both should live"?

Dick, not having been married before, answered never a word.

"Say I will," said the fond father.

"Say you will what?" demanded the bridegroom.

"Silly kid, not me but you, you say 'I will,'" was Bob's involved reply.

"I will," said Dick, without conviction.

The necessary questions were asked of Molly. Say "I will," whispered Mary, and she did so.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

"I will—I mean, I do," said Bob.

Some delay followed while the minister endeavoured to "cause the man with the right hand to take the woman by her right hand and to say after him" —or rather after *her*—"as followeth"—

"I, Richard Branksome, do take thee, . . ." Their troth plighted and—

"Where's the ring?" asked Bob.

"Oh! I haven't got one," said Dick, horrified at the catastrophe, and overawed by the solemnity of the occasion.

The bridesmaid to the rescue, a curtain ring was unearthed, the ceremony proceeded, and in due course came to an end.

> "Now you're married we wish you joy,
> First a girl and then a boy,
> Seven years after, son and daughter,
> Pray young couple come kiss together,"

sang the wedding party—parent, priest and bridesmaid dancing round the newly-married pair.

> "Kiss her once, kiss her twice,
> Kiss her three times over."

Dick obeyed with gusto, and then—he bolted out of the room, leaving four astonished people staring after him. What was this that he had done? Were they *really* married? Yes, of course they were—he had said "I will," and so had Molly. He, Dick, was a married boy! He had got a wife, Mrs.—yes, Mrs. Branksome. How awful! What would he do! How could he support her—his income never in the fattest week exceeded twopence.

His spirit was oppressed by a vague sense of years of bondage—bondage, however sweet—which lay eternally before him. Mrs. Branksome! Was it irrevocable? Could nothing unsay those dread things that he had uttered with so little realisation of their everlasting significance for him?

Poor bridegroom, he felt that he had taken a wife "for worse" indeed!

Pale and agitated he sought Jenny, who had done the fatal deed.

"Are we truly married?" he demanded.

"Yes, of course you are," Bob declared, "and

Molly won't ever come and live at home again, now she's your wife."

Molly's eyes became big and bright.

"Shan't I go home this evening?" she asked, dismayed.

"No, of course not," said Bob decisively.

But he had misgivings none the less. He would find it dull at home without Molly, and—what would Molly's Mother have to say on the subject? This thing was not so simple as it seemed. Even Mary began to doubt the wisdom of the proceeding. Molly was a very sweet little child; but she, Mary, had always enjoyed the position of only daughter of the house, and now to have not a sister but a sister-in-law, was rather too much—and so suddenly too!

Dick's sense of vast responsibility and Molly's longing for the home from which she had been so unwittingly severed cast a further gloom upon the wedding party. Bride and groom were on the verge of tears.

Before they overflowed, however, Jenny, herself a prey to doubts as to the effectiveness of the bond she had sealed, declared the marriage to be null and void.

"You see, I didn't have a surplice on," she explained, "so it's quite all right." The reason seemed sufficient for herself, and was vastly reassuring to the unwedded pair.

"Then we're not married after all," exclaimed Dick, his forebodings dispelled.

"Can I come home with you, Bob?" said Molly, smiling again.

"Yes, I suppose you can," he answered.

"Are you glad?" asked Dick, reproach in his voice.

"Yes, are you?" Molly replied guilelessly.

"Yes," said Dick.

"Then we can't have a wedding breakfast!" Mary said, regretfully.

"No," said Jenny, "but we can have tea."

And a great tea they had. There had been some special provision for the occasion, and this fact, together with the sudden reaction from the recent depression of spirit, rendered the ex-wedding party particularly gay. The bread and butter was not cut in "steps," and the cakes were not only home-made.

Presently Mary was munching meringues.

"I love these," she announced, "they don't make any *impression*."

"Oh, don't they," retorted Bob from the midst of farthing buns, as he eyed the meringue dish apprehensively, "You'd better try these."

"Molly likes them," he added, with a reminiscent twinkle in his eye. He had once persuaded Molly to go into a shop and enquire the price of "two farthing buns." Molly's confusion had pleased him considerably.

Before tea was ended it was seen that the rain had cleared off, and a watery sun was endeavouring to make amends for its late appearance. On the conclusion of the meal, therefore, an unanimous vote was given in favour of the garden, and out the four children went, having pledged themselves to abstain from contact with trees and bushes.

"Then we can't play hide-and-seek," was the unsatisfactory result of this embargo.

"Let's have races," said Mary, who prided herself upon fleetness of foot.

Obviously it must be a handicap race, and no little discussion was necessary before they were placed in position for a dash across the lawn and back. Molly was to run half the distance, and Dick took up his position ten yards behind her. Mary was considerably further in the rear with Bob behind her again.

The signal was given by Molly dropping a handkerchief, she being in the view of all. The excitement entailed by the performance of this duty obliterated from her mind the necessity of running herself, and it was fortunate for them that no enthusiastic supporters had favoured her chances at long odds.

But Dick's jaw was set as he passed Molly and sped towards the goal. He heard swift feet behind and ran faster. Bob rushed passed him, and secured the lead. Mary had just drawn level with Dick, and he saw her short skirt forging past him, when to her bitter chagrin, she stumbled, fell, and Dick was second at the post. He could not, or did not, resist a gibe at his vanquished sister, who had, of course, proved that she was more than his match at the game.

Mary's plaints filled the air as they came to the end of the lawn, and the summerhouse. This was large, as summerhouses go, and was set in an open space.

"Try and catch him round that," suggested Bob.

In a moment Mary was chasing the panting Dick round and round the house, amid the plaudits of Bob and Molly. Dick had started just behind Mary, and

she consequently had to make a complete extra round before catching him. On the completion of the third lap, Mary had made up nearly half this distance.

Suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to Bob.

The door of the summerhouse was open, and he thrust Dick quickly inside. Mary sped by and on, expecting every instant to see Dick's heels flying before her.

Loudly did Bob cheer the hidden Dick, faster ran Mary, finding it incredible that she should take so long to overhaul her small opponent. Was it possible that Dick could run as fast as she? Assuredly not! and she made an extra effort.

Dick himself had scarcely realised the point of his forced retirement, and it was only when he pushed his head out of the door and was seen by Mary that the pursuit ended.

"What," she demanded, as well as her shortened breath would permit, "are you . . . doing . . . there? You little . . . beast, and I've been running. . . . "

Here Bob broke in, somewhat dismayed, if the truth be told, by the righteously indignant Mary.

"I did it," he said, "I'm so sorry, but it was so funny, and . . . "

A peal of irrepressible mirth completed the sentence.

To be robbed of well-merited victory twice within five minutes is more than mere human nature can stand, and Mary retired in dudgeon and in tears to the house.

Fortunately for all parties the hour of departure was at hand, but neither Bob nor Molly saw Mary again that day.

"Come along, Molly," said Bob, as he got into the car which awaited them.

"I'm glad I haven't got to stay," Molly said, as they drove away.

"So am I," Bob agreed, but he wished he could have made matters right with Mary before he had left. Mary wished so too as she watched them from her bedroom window.

She had come to see the humour of the situation.

Chapter X.

In the Night Watches.

Mothers—the best of them—have a happy habit of tucking us up in bed, when we are young, and Dick was the affectionate possessor of such a Mother. This ministration was usually followed by the crooning of some song, or if it happened to be Sunday, a hymn was selected as being more appropriate.

On Sundays, too, a Bible story was always told by Mother, and discussed thoroughly by the children before bedtime arrived. At such times many an illuminating thought and often a startling one had been born of the fertile brains of Mary and Dick.

They had once, for instance, listened with enthralled attention to the story of the unhappy end of Lot's wife, and had discussed it from many points of view. Dick, who liked accuracy, asked Mother what was her name.

Now it had never struck Mrs. Branksome that a personal designation for Lot's wife is absent from the page of history, and she was nonplussed until Mary filled the gap with a brilliant suggestion—"Let's call her Lottie," she said.

But to-night he had been impressed by the living interest of the Holy Book, for he had listened to the story of David and Goliath over again. Surely he had never heard so wonderful a tale. One boy against an army, a giant at the head of that army, and the

boy had conquered! Nothing in Grimm had for Dick the same vivid attraction.

He was more than ever interested in the Bible, and the thought of it kept him more or less silent till the lights were about to be put out.

"Mother," he asked, as she gave him her good-night kiss, "did the Bible come out in Monthly Parts like the Children's Encyclopaedia?"

Mrs. Branksome assured him to the contrary, and shortly afterwards, Dick and Mary, whose two white beds were on either side of the same room, fell asleep.

But Dick dreamed. At first his dreams were vague and indefinite, and between them he slept the calm sleep that was his due, but later on he found himself very much unnerved by Goliath who was coming upon him; Goliath, breathing heavily and threatening him with an immediate and unpleasant end. Goliath approached him, and then unexpectedly got under Dick's bed and went to sleep, snoring sonorously. A particularly loud snore wakened Dick. He sat up, his heart beating quickly, and then he held his breath, for he could distinctly hear Goliath snoring under his bed!

The moon shone into the room and he could see Mary lying asleep, but the distance that divided them seemed immeasurable. Dare he make a dash across the room?

Dick paused, and then, terrified, he sprang from the bed, and, expecting every instant that his feet would be gripped by a large hairy hand, he reached Mary's side in safety.

"Wake up, wake up," he said, between sobs of fear, "Goliath's under my bed and snoring f-frightfully."

Mary was soon awake, and being infected with Dick's fear without knowing the cause, she clung closely to him.

"Listen," he said softly, under his fast-coming breath.

Surely enough they both heard the sound as of heavy breathing.

"It's by the window," whispered Mary. The window was open, and Dick persuaded himself that in the shadow he could see Goliath glaring at him.

"Shall we wake Jenny ? " Dick asked, not daring to move. Both found it hard to screw up sufficient courage to descend from the bed and go to the next room. They wondered that the hammering of their hearts did not waken Goliath.

Now, at this point, a slight digression is necessary, in order to explain the events that followed.

Jenny, the nurserymaid, slept in a room adjoining that of the children, the windows of both rooms being on the same side of the house, and indeed very near to each other. Although it was not long after eleven o'clock, Jenny had been wooing sleep for an hour, but had failed to find it. She, too, had heard the sound as of one breathing heavily, and lay scarcely daring to breathe herself, and preferring stiffness in all her joints to the movement which might attract the attention of the supposed marauder.

She reviewed all the stories she had ever heard of the methods of dealing with burglars who intruded into one's room in the middle of the night. She remembered one concerning a courageous dame who had steadfastly feigned sleep when a burglar was in the room, but who caught such a glimpse of him as enabled her at a later date to identify him and to

send him to the seclusion he deserved. This was the plan she resolved to adopt should the necessity—which Heaven forbid !—ever arise.

Jenny then was lying stiff with fear and her ears strained to catch any further development on the part of the one who made that regular, ominous sound.

Imagine, therefore, her horror when she heard padding feet come to her very door, and saw the door open. Her hour had come ! The very ordeal she had dreaded was at hand ! Jenny closed her eyes, closed them firmly and with a determination that made unwonted creases appear about her nose and eyes, and that drew her upper lip away from the teeth that in natural slumber it would cover.

Jenny looked ghastly in the moonlight. Unnaturally stiff, she appeared as if she had died in agony.

The children came into the room, thankful for the presence of Jenny—till they saw her ! When they did so, they stood petrified, staring at her. Goliath and all his hosts were as nothing to this appalling vision !

To come upon what was apparently a corpse, distorted beyond recognition, and seen only by the moonlight that shone through the open window, was sufficient to unnerve a stouter heart than Dick's or Mary's.

To touch her was out of the question ; they merely devoured her with frightened eyes. And still, even in Jenny's room, Goliath could be heard.

On her part, Jenny knew that the burglar was watching her. She felt the keen penetrating gaze, and, if possible, closed her eyes more tightly still. She would never be able to open them in order to identify the intruder. How could the other woman have had so much courage ?

Jenny held her breath in her desire to simulate the peacefulness of sleep.

A tense stillness filled the room. Jenny's nerves were the first to give way, and the terrified children saw the apparently dead arise, and Jenny with blind haste sprang from the bed, and extending stiffened fingers, which to her added horror touched flesh, she thrust the unfortunate Mary to the wall, and with a blood-curling and unearthly yell, she fled the room.

Almost beside themselves with terror, the children followed her out on to the landing which Mr. and Mrs. Branksome were approaching hastily, wondering whatever could have prompted so horrible a cry as they had heard.

There was Jenny, panting, wild-eyed and pale. Her hair, which by the vulgar would have been described as "carrots," was partly held prisoner by sundry wisps of paper, and partly fell in a loose plait over the pink nightdress in which she was clad.

The children avoided her as a plague and ran thankfully to the safe protection of their parents.

Jenny was assailed by a stream of questions, but becoming embarrassed as her scattered senses were collected, she retreated to her room where, with additional clothing, she made herself more presentable to the male view.

When she had subsequently given some slight indication of the scene in her bedroom, her master laughed so long and with such excess that Jenny retired in dudgeon.

"But Goliath's still in there," said Dick, when he and Mary were being taken back to bed.

Now this sounded so extremely improbable to

the practical ears of Mr. Branksome, who was carrying Dick, that he frankly disbelieved the statement.

"You listen," his son insisted, on entering the room.

All four were still, and then after a moment's quiet they distinctly heard the sound that Dick had imputed to Goliath.

That it was not the giant and that the sound came from without the window was soon clear. Mother was left to see the children into bed for the second time that night. But Mr. Branksome, who did not like to listen too intently at the window for fear of putting a further tax on the already strained nerves of his children, went out of the room expressing his intention of finding out what was the cause of that noise.

So he made his way stealthily down the stairs in the darkness. The sound had certainly been odd, and he wished he had not to go out into the garden at half-past eleven to interview any stranger who might be prowling there. He was so unprepared too, for pyjamas and a dressing gown, whatever their advantages, do not lend dignity to their wearer. And that was a very nasty noise that Jenny had made.

After all, what was the point of paying for burglary insurance if, when threatened with theft, one risked life and limb to save goods and chattels for which the company would pay?

But this was cowardice, and his wife and children, to say nothing of Jenny, would want to know what had made that noise in the garden.

What *had* made that noise in the garden?

There being no other weapon at hand, Mr. Branksome, feeling heroic, picked up a large wooden rattle

that hung in the hall, a relic of his undergraduate enthusiasm at the Cambridge May Races, and advanced cautiously out of the front door.

How cold it was and cheerless ! The moon looked so abominably unsympathetic, and its very brilliancy set Mr. Branksome at a disadvantage, for he was a clear mark for any uncharitable marksman, and the garden —why were there so many shrubs ?—might be full of such. Mr. Branksome shivered as he thought of it. Yet out here somewhere was the creature who had made that unpleasant noise.

If burglars wanted to burgle, or marauders maraud, why could they not be silent about it and let peaceful householders sleep . . .

At least, his wife might have looked out to encourage him . . .

Mr. Branksome listened ; not far distant, and not so terrifying at close-quarters, he heard again the curious sound, and within two minutes his laughter returned upon him, for, standing under an ancient elm, twenty feet away from the children's open window, he saw the owls whose nest was there, clustered upon a stout bough, and as they kept their wide-eyed watch with their young, he heard them making the sound that had caused so much commotion amongst his household.

How delightful it was in the garden now, bathed as it was in moonlight. It was positively a sin that people should go to bed and miss the silver beauty of a night like this. Mr. Branksome determined that when the next full moon was due—not just now, for various reasons—he and his family should camp out in the garden.

For the present he would remain out for five

THE MOON LOOKED SO ABOMINABLY UNSYMPATHETIC

minutes, and then would seek the bed that awaited him. He strolled happily round the house towards the front gate.

As he came within sight of the roadway he espied two happy lovers, wrapped in each others' embrace, advancing slowly towards him. Although they were wholly oblivious of everything besides themselves, modesty bade Mr. Branksome, clad as he was, retire into the bushes.

The night was very still. The rustling of the leaves and the cooing of the lovers' conversation, punctuated by the soft whisper of a kiss, alone broke the silence.

The man in hiding began to feel ashamed of himself for eavesdropping. His conscience was quickened by memories of the past, in which his wife, a summer-house and her objectionable young brother, were concerned. But Mr. Branksome was a man of humour, and when he was just about to retreat an evil genius seized him. Why should he have brought out with him a rattle in vain?

Suddenly the stillness of night was shattered. A long loud clatter, as of the sudden splitting of much wood, rent the air, and then above it two terror-striken screams, rivalling Jenny's of half an hour before, were heard, as the lovers, separated, hurled themselves into the convenient ditch and remained there trembling. The end of the world had clearly come, and each, being alone, remembered Scripture, and regretted that the other had been taken while he (or she) was left.

That night it was long before the Branksomes slept, and at intervals throughout the night the bed shook with the suppressed mirth of one or other of them.

Chapter XI.

A Bicycle Ride.

When there are fifteen children in the family, the development of any one through the various stages of childhood, from the days of "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms," to that of "creeping like a snail unwillingly to school," matters little. In such a home should one outgrow the period of inconsequent doings and remarks, there is always another to fill the gap and to increase the joy of living to harrassed parents.

But with the Branksomes this was not so, and the fast returning birthdays meant, each of them, a final leave-taking of one such stage, at least in the case of Dick, and the coming of his birthday—a fact of joyful importance to him—was annually accepted with reluctance by his elders.

The day of Eton collars was not yet, but how prosaic it would be when it came. Albeit they would not have had Dick's development arrested for any consideration, which is as well, in the case of an impossible feat.

So it was Dick's birthday, and Dick thought well of the world. For the world as he knew it had risen to the occasion with commendable unanimity. His

grandfather, following immemorial custom, established that is to say as far back as Dick could remember, sent him a Postal Order for five shillings, accompanied by a solatium of half-a-crown for Mary. As Dick received a similar present on Mary's birthday, he did not begrudge her her good fortune.

In acknowledgment he wrote at great pains as follows :

"My dear Grandpa

Thank you very much for your nice present I shall buy some sweets and a little pony with it I want a little pony Mary and my rabbits are quite well they have some new babies I hope you are too I have got a lovely bicycle I rode 100 miles yesterday nearly do you like sweets I do specially toffee I pray for you every night your loving Dick "

The punctuation was poor.

Yet the composition—it was indeed a composite work, proper spelling being the result of numerous inquiries—represented much earnest labour.

To outlay the five shillings also required considerable care and forethought. He kept intact the big silver coin for which—as being more tangible wealth—his father exchanged the Postal Order, until he was able to visit an "emporium" containing many desirable things. He was on a shopping expedition with his Mother, but insisted on being left to his own devices in the toy department.

He had never before bought any important thing "by himself," and the responsibility rather awed him when he came face to face with a smiling assistant. However, he hit upon a device, to his immense secret

pride, which should be sufficient excuse for hesitative consideration.

"I want," he said, "to buy a present for a little boy."

"Yes," said the smiling assistant, "About how old is he, sir ? "

Sir ! This was life indeed.

"About six," said Dick, deliciously conscious of conspiracy.

Now when one is purchasing a present for a friend, it is but natural that the greatest care should be exercised in the choice. The merits of many and various gifts must be thoughtfully weighed. For himself it would not matter—so Dick hoped the smiling assistant would think—but for a friend, it was obvious that the choice was not nearly so simple a matter. So Dick had brought for his inspection such a number of things as even his Mother, or a less practical woman than she, would have been ashamed to have had produced for her benefit, though in the lady's clothing department.

It was a joyous experience, and when Dick departed laden with a "Harmless Pistol" outfit and a box of the latest regiment of soldiers it was with entire confidence in the pleasure of the little boy of about six on whose behalf so much trouble had been caused.

The smiling assistant—a most good-natured young lady—also gave Dick a box of sweets "for himself." The sense of conspiracy was heightened as he thanked her profusely. On her part the smiling assistant found in the thanks sufficient reward for her labour and the price of the sweets.

Another gift that fell to Dick's lot on this his

sixth birthday was that of Aunt Susan, the lady who talked of monkeys on the back, and who was then staying in the house. It consisted of a set of cricket things which Dick did not want.

There was, however, a secondary reason for his dissatisfaction at this gift. It happened in this way.

His soul yearned for a model fort, a suitable residence for his battalions. So with implicit faith, he had decided to ask Almighty aid in fulfilling his wish. He had discussed the matter with Mary, who, knowing the mutability of human desire, and —cynic that she was!—that by the time a direct answer to his prayer was vouchsafed he might have outgrown his wish for the particular gift, advised him to pray for "the chance of a fort." Surely nothing but good could be derived from so cautious a request.

But caution was outdone.

The substance of his prayer, offered at the knees of nurse, newly returned from her attendance upon her mother, was related to Aunt Susan, who, generous soul, asked Dick if he would like a fort for his birthday, some few days before that event.

Dick was confounded. He felt that a fort, so given, would have such solemn associations as to make it sacrilege to put it to its natural uses. Had the aunt merely given him the thing, he would have rejoiced greatly, and would have shown Mary how wrong were her views as to human nature and Divine benevolence.

But to receive so literal an answer to his request was unspeakably awesome, and Dick, to his aunt's considerable surprise and his own later exasperation, declined the offer.

Consequently he received the set of cricket implements, which he did not appreciate, and never in his life did he possess a fort. Yet that aunt had done her very best to please!

But other things paled before the unexpected magnificence of Father and Mother's present—the bicycle.

It was a light little machine whose every part shone aggressively. Its sole demerit in Dick's eyes was that it boasted no free wheel, but otherwise it was just a miniature of Mr. Branksome's. Dick was hugely pleased at the cross-bar and the step—so much superior to the simple method of mounting Mary's machine. No doubt simple methods were suited to simple creatures such as girls, but for him—a step!

Its general spotlessness caused Mary anxiously to pay greater attention to her own machine, now several months old, than she had bestowed upon it for a considerable time. She caused the handle-bars to shine again.

Dick did not take long to obtain the mastery over his new possession, his knees bearing witness to the stern reality of the conflict.

So, one grand day (as Aunt Susan used impressively to say when commencing a story) they arranged to go for a "proper ride" with Bob. Molly, not being the owner of anything so splendid as a bicycle, had to be content with the promise that she should be taught to ride in view of the future contingency of her possessing a bicycle of her own. She could, of course, easily learn on Dick's, seeing that her skirts were short. So the three set off together and alone.

If Dick usually talked "fifteen to the dozen" he had to pedal at a greater rate than that to keep up with his two companions. But he rode manfully with no sign of lagging.

Mary, having ridden for a year, felt it encumbent upon her to ride on his right hand, to keep him from harm. She also favoured him with items of advice—excellent advice—which Dick ignored scornfully. He kept religiously to the "bell side" of the road, and knew that he had to pass people on the "brake side."

People whom they passed were considerably charmed by the trio.

It was August, it was warm, and after an hour's ride a wayside rest suited the inclinations of them all. So they dismounted, and stretched themselves under a friendly tree. Near by some shrubs were growing, which were covered with those sticky prickly balls, whose adhesive qualities make them admirable weapons in playful warfare.

Bob, anxious to be off, discovered these treasures, and they had a preliminary skirmish among themselves. But thinking that stranger-foes might prove more attractive victims, they filled their pockets with the burrs and pedalled on hopefully.

People whom they passed now were considerably annoyed by the trio.

It was so wholly delightful to pepper pedestrians and to leave them protesting vehemently amid the dust raised by the hastening wheels. Obviously, a bicycle in time of war was an invaluable possession.

In this, as in many another case, success bred daring, and daring disaster.

They had just expended one round of ammunition upon an irate old lady with most creditable effect,

when Bob saw a dogcart ahead, driven by a brown coated gentleman of the most promising appearance. His back looked so smooth and unadorned as to require the ornamentation of a bunch of burrs.

Bob pedalled hard for something like half a mile, leaving Mary and Dick in the rear. He gradually drew up to the dogcart and at a hill he got within range of that smooth brown back.

With unerring accuracy he threw a little clump of burrs—and they stuck in the very centre of that unruffled surface.

Far from unruffled, however, was the mind of the person inside the coat, or the countenance he turned upon Bob. The irascible old gentleman was furious, and turning with marvellous expedition in the narrow road, he gave chase after the much alarmed Bob.

Bob rode, as Dick had run from Gyp, urged on by terror. But the cob in the shafts was fast, its driver furious, and Bob was being overhauled when he reached Mary and Dick, who had waited when they saw Bob follow his victim.

His victim! The worm had turned indeed.

Bob debated rapidly within himself. Should he dismount and face this fury, with at least some moral support from the presence of two allies, or should he go on? But the road was long and straight, he had lost ground already. . . . Bob got off.

The cob was pulled almost on to its haunches.

"How dare you, you young villain? You deserve to be thrashed for your impertinence. Take that, you reprobate, take that and that."

Thus the brown-backed gentleman as with considerable gusto he lashed the pallid Bob with his whip.

Fortunately for him, Bob's pockets, bulging with large supplies of ammunition, saved him from serious hurt.

"You'll be put into prison if you hurl missiles at respectable people, that's what will happen to you, you vulgar little boy."

"Did he hurt you ?" Mary asked, trembling with fright at this awful development.

"No, of course not," grunted Jehu, taking the question to himself. "James, turn her head round."

James, who had sprung down from his place beside his master when they had overtaken Bob, obeyed. Bestowing an encouraging wink upon the boy, he climbed to his place again as the cob started off.

Jehu hurling invectives at Bob, disappeared—the burrs still on his back.

"Crikey !" exclaimed the over-strained hero. "What a pig. But he's still got them . . . on his back," and Bob broke into hysterical mirth.

Nevertheless, they threw no more burrs that day, but the discussion of the matter in all its bearings kept their minds occupied as they pedalled along their way.

Presently they came to the top of a hill which, though not very long, was steep and winding.

"I'm off, down here," Bob shouted joyously, as he forged ahead free-wheeling fearlessly at top speed.

"Dick, *do* be careful," urged Mary, the instructress still, "mind and keep your brakes on hard."

"I'm all right," retorted Dick airily.

Beyond the brow of the hill, the incline grew steeper. The reckless Bob was on before, with head lowered professionally over the handle-bars, half hidden by the cloud of dust he raised in his descent.

Even Mary had gone faster than her wont, and Dick was left behind, a novice at the game but full of enthusiasm.

Faster and faster he went down the steep incline —how the road ran away from underneath him, it might be a live thing flying for its life. How the wind whistled in his ears, there must be a gale blowing chasing the earth that was slipping away. How . . . but a stone lying in the middle of the road upset both Dick's reflections and himself.

The August sun was as hot as ever, though the road was still and the gale had ceased to blow, as a quiet huddled little figure lay in the dust which was darkened here and there by an ominous stain. The buckled bicycle curvetted into the ditch.

Meanwhile, the other two had reached the bottom of the hill, flushed with pleasure and the rush of the air, and Mary pulled up on reaching Bob, who was speaking with a man whom he found smoking a clay pipe, and leaning against the front wheel of a gipsy caravan.

Bob enquired which was the nearest way home.

Having discovered this, both children gave their attention to the horse which was enjoying a rest— "to get some wind in 'im" as his custodian observed —preparatory to the task which lay before him. And a heavy task it would be.

"Bob," Mary suddenly exclaimed, "wherever is Dick ? " A frenzied glance up the hill revealed nothing. "Wherever can he be ? "

"Dick ? I don't know," returned Bob, anxiously. "Dick ! "—a lusty shout—"oh, the kid's hiding round the caravan." But Dick was not hiding.

"He must have fallen off, and I'm sure he's killed. What are we to do?" and Mary's face was white under the tan, and her eyes grew big and frightened.

" 'Ullo, what's up," demanded he of the clay, as the two returned round the back of the vehicle.

A minute more and the clay was restored to its owner's pocket, and he, followed by two frightened children, went quickly up the hill. He it was who first saw Dick, an unconscious bundle in the dust, and ran to him. He picked Dick up and smoothed back the hair from the bruised forehead.

"Lor' bless my soul, if it ain't the kid," he exclaimed. "Kid, kid, open your eyes and talk to me, it's Sandy," he whispered rapidly to Dick, who gave only a little moan by way of answer.

The sun shone still, but its light had gone for Mary and Bob as Dick, dying or dead, they were sure, was brought quickly to the caravan.

" 'Ere, Missus, it's the kid, and 'e's come off his bike and cut 'isself."

A towsled woman's head appeared, and for the second time Dick was clasped in the mother-arms of "Missus."

"Is he dead ? " sobbed Mary, feeling a murderess. "I wish I was dead too."

"Shut up," said Bob chokingly, but with little conviction. Life was black for both of them at the moment.

Presently the woman appeared.

"What are you standing moping there for ? " she demanded of Sandy. "Go and get a doctor—sharp about it."

"Yes, have my bike," said Bob, glad of action.

So Sandy with his knees knocking the handle-bars

at every revolution, made the best of his way to the nearest village, while Bob and Mary were taken into the caravan and were comforted to find Dick had life in him still.

Presently, when his head and face had been washed with cold water, he opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked, as he tried to stir.

"You're all right, dearie," said the woman tenderly.

Dick looked at her a moment, and then—"Oh, it's you," he said, and shut his eyes again.

Meanwhile Sandy was approaching the outskirts of the Branksome domain with some trepidation. Suppose the Justice of the Peace, before whom he was about to make a voluntary appearance, should send him on suspicion to the police court. Would the investigations that followed set him at large again? Sandy had his doubts on the subject.

But the safety of "the kid" was at stake, and for that he was prepared to take risks.

When, however, he was shown into the presence of the magistrate, Sandy's anxiety was relieved, and before long the dogcart was requisitioned once again, and, with the doctor, whom they picked up on the way, Mr. Branksome found himself for the second time setting out to bring Dick back from Sandy's caravan.

Dick, in due course, was restored to the bosom of his family, but not before Sandy had in his pocket proof positive that there is some humanity left even in so misguided a person as an English Justice of the Peace.

When Dick's mind was sufficiently restored to review the events of the afternoon, he could not avoid

the painful conviction that his reputation as a cyclist had suffered somewhat.

"Beastly stone," he muttered, after several minutes' silence at the close of a substantial repast, "I'd like to eat it."

"Wouldn't do you much good, old chap," said his Father consolingly. "And, anyhow, you've had a very big tea."

"It would hurt it," said Dick revengefully, and ignoring the point of his Father's reminder ; "Do you think," he asked later on, "that I shall *ever* have another bicycle ? "

"I daresay, *some* day," replied the cautious parent.

Chapter XII.

Aunt Susan.

More than once in the course of this narrative reference has been made to that excellent lady known to all Branksomes as Aunt Susan. She was a great-aunt. To say this is in no way to cast aspersions upon her figure—of whose slim proportions she was indeed inordinately proud. Rather, being the sole survivor of her own family, and sister of Mr. Branksome's late father, she became "great" in her auntliness so far as the second generation was concerned, and adopted a grandmotherly attitude towards them, which aroused the enduring scorn of their maternal grandmother.

"What does a woman like that know of children?" the grandmother would demand. Aunt Susan's criticism of the other's conduct was usually brief. "Very unwise," she would say, with a toss of her head.

The antipathy between these two was regarded as inevitable, and had dated from their first encounter at a family gathering. Within five minutes, the one had come to Mrs. Branksome and said "My dear, who is that *very* stout lady?" and the other, "Clare, *who* is the sketch in black?" Mrs. Branksome's replies "My mother" and "Henry's Aunt" had been almost equally cold.

Aunt Susan was accustomed to pay protracted visits to her nephews and nieces throughout the land in the capacity of advisor-in-chief by reason of her greater age, and therefore more profound experience.

Hence her appearance on this domestic stage. That her visits were not appreciated so fully as should have been the case was her firm conviction, but a precept that she preached and practised was "Live and learn," and the Branksomes, as a family, were learning.

Aunt Susan belonged to the old School, and modernity she cordially detested. It was, in her view, merely the sign of the ignorance of youth. When worsted in argument she invariably adopted the quite irrefutable position that "when you are my age, you won't think as you do now." Wild horses, however, would not drag from Aunt Susan's maiden bosom the secret of how long it would take for a given individual to reach her age of wisdom.

But apart from her very practical views as to life and its conduct, Aunt Susan had a soaring imagination which revelled in weird tales. She loved above all things to make her audience grow chill with terror as she related the horrors of the supernatural, or of her imaginings. She had practised her art—for she could tell tales consummately—for a generation, and had terrorised Mr. Branksome himself as a child of four. The horrors of one such occasion abide with him still.

He was staying with his Grandmother, whose daughter Susan was—at a rough estimate—twenty-five and tyrannical. Aunt Susan had expatiated to the small boy on some grim passage of the Scripture from which she had derived the fearful information,

that "the worm that dieth not" resides from infancy within the mortal body that eventually will be its prey. Such disturbing doctrine not unnaturally terrified her small and credulous nephew, who full of terror flew to his Grandmother for protection against this inward and devouring foe his aunt had discovered to him. The good old lady thought the child demented when he came to her, howling, horrified and stamping his feet as he yelled "G'andma, my G'andma, Auntie Suie says I've got an 'orrm in my bey-yee."

Proper articulation was difficult under the stress of his emotions.

To have so eerie a habitant there, ineradicable, silent, and yet of life-long patience, was unspeakable. The small boy lifted up his voice and wept vociferously, frenzied by a sense of impotence. Bereft of adequate expression he could only repeat "Oh, G'andma, my G'andma, Auntie Suie says I've got an 'orrrrm in my bey-yee," and he clutched that portion of his anatomy with affectionate desperation.

Thus, Aunt Susan had impressed herself at an early age upon her present host.

That that host had advanced materially either in age or understanding Aunt Susan found hard to believe. Yet the years had accomplished this improvement in Mr. Branksome. The passage of time had not, however, marked so much change in the person of Aunt Susan, and it is further to her credit that she felt—save in wisdom—younger even than she looked. With the children she always displayed the most amazing vigour for one of her years, and acted in a manner compatible with the youth she felt still to be hers.

Gymnastics, however, were somewhat strenuous even for Aunt Susan.

One day, tea being over, she was out in the garden with the children, with whom were Molly and Bob, and they were bent, after other amusement, on climbing the sturdy tree in which the owls had roosted. This shed its shade in a quiet portion of the garden at the back of the house, not overlooked by any of the rooms in daily use, but by the children's bedroom—and Jenny's !—among others.

To climb the elm was, for Aunt Susan, an impossible task, and for the children it proved so difficult that a ladder was requisitioned from the stables. The trunk had no "nubbly" places, nor any crevices for the assistance of climbing hands and feet. By the aid of the ladder, however, they were able to climb well up the trunk, and to find leafy resting places amongst the boughs. The children found the retreat delightful.

With her youthful companions in mid-air, and Mr. and Mrs. Branksome having gone out in the dog-cart, Aunt Susan began to find life rather dull, so that it did not, finally, take much eloquence on the children's part to induce the athletic spinster to ascend the ladder. This she consented to do, having obtained a book and a cushion which was placed for her in a peculiarly comfortable twist of the tree. The children dangled their feet or endangered their necks alternately, below her.

Aunt Susan felt that she was fulfilling a duty to the family by preventing their further ascent.

Bob, on the other hand, had wished to reach the summit of the tree, but being a guest in the house of friends, he could hardly suggest Aunt Susan's removal.

Eventually he made the suggestion that they should play hide-and-seek with the tree as "home," and Aunt Susan herself applauded the notion as giving her some hope of slumber. She was exceedingly comfortable.

The game progressed merrily, as it usually does, and in due course Bob was left at the tree while the others sought discreet hiding places. As a matter of fact, they all went together round the house by way of the lawn that Mr. Branksome had crossed while he contemplated the beauty of a certain moonlit evening. Thus the children came to the bushes by the road at the end of the carriage drive. There they hid near one another because of Bob's prowess as a runner, hoping that one at any rate would get home in safety by this means.

Bob religiously closed his eyes for the allotted span at the foot of the ladder. Then, in the tree above, he saw that Aunt Susan had been wooed to slumber by the whispering breeze.

Bob yielded to temptation and removed the ladder. Aunt Susan still slept. It would be fun if she waked up before he came back from the search, with the others.

So Bob set out to find the other three, confident in the coming display of his agility.

He hunted in every hiding place on that side of the house, so as not to have foes behind him when he went to the front. Eventually he came to the carriage drive, and hearing the voices of the hidden ones at the end of it, he hastened after his prey.

They, however, had forgotten him in the excitement of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Branksome return in the dogcart. They had been proving the worth of a new

mare, just purchased, which had given every satisfaction. Mr. Branksome was protesting, when Bob joined the group, that he must go in to some work that awaited him; the children were clamouring for a ride behind the new mare. Both had their way, and very shortly afterwards Mother with four attendant children, was bowling down the road in splendid style. Mr. Branksome waved them farewell, and entering the house, retired to the library to wrestle with a pile of documents upon his table.

He had thoroughly enjoyed his expedition, and he congratulated himself heartily on his latest acquisition. A good horse was the delight of his heart. The picture of the mare's arched neck and high stepping forelegs came between him and that pile of documents. But these must be tackled in real earnest, so Mr. Branksome lit a pipe and came to close quarters with his work in an arm-chair.

Neither as nephew nor as host did he do himself justice on this afternoon. Not once did Aunt Susan cross his contented mind.

Meanwhile, Mother and the children were making their swift way towards the scene of Dick's catastrophe. Molly was to see exactly how steep had been the hill which caused the trouble. The children did all the talking, and Bob gave the most harrowing account of his feelings as the brown-coated gentleman had turned upon him.

Now Mother had made a shrewd guess at the identity of this brown-coated one, and when about a mile distant from the scene of the chase the dogcart whirled in between two massive gates, and following a long drive pulled up before the imposing entrance of a Georgian mansion.

A servant appeared in answer to Bob's ring of the bell.

"Is Sir Joseph in?" asked Mrs. Branksome. "Perhaps he will see me," she added, on receiving an affirmative reply to her first question.

Mrs. Branksome desired the practical sympathy of Sir Joseph Tomkins in aid of one of her local good works, and she thought she might derive a little humour out of the situation at the same time. The children remained in the dogcart, a groom standing at the mare's head, while Mrs. Branksome went within.

A desultory conversation was maintained by the children. They bickered at each other, Bob being suitably domineering over Molly and Mary over Dick —not quite so easy a task—and they made apt comments upon their surroundings.

Presently Bob became uncomfortably aware of the fact that the eyes of the groom were twinkling with an amusement not wholly unconnected with himself. With a gulp of astonishment and even of horror, Bob recognised him as James, who had winked surreptitiously at him when the brown-coated Jehu had driven off with the burrs upon his back They were in the lion's den, the giant's castle!

As James saw mutual recognition dawn in the eyes of Bob, he touched his cap with "Seen you before, I believe, sir."

This opened a conversation which dealt extensively with the adventures of the afternoon on which they had first come into contact. When Bob's alarm was assuaged, the half hour occupied by Mother's visit passed happily enough, and presently her voice and that of Sir Joseph were heard. James, at the

horse's head, showed no more sign of emotion than the sphinx, after his hand had gone to his mouth to cover a discreet cough.

"Thank you so much, Sir Joseph," Mother was heard to say, and then, "My children are with me and some small friends of theirs."

"Charming, dear lady," replied Sir Joseph ingratiatingly. "Why did you not bring them in?"

"Well," said Mother, smiling back at him, "Children are a perturbing element sometimes, and they were quite happy out here."

They were now by the dogcart. Mother looked at Bob, who, crimson, was endeavouring to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. Then he heard his late enemy exclaim, "Lord bless my soul if that isn't the young reprobate who attacked me in the public high road the other day."

"Attacked you?" queried Mother, emphatic and incredulous.

Then laughing explanations followed, and Bob shook hands with the ill-used Sir Joseph, and was cautioned to mend his ways in the future.

"Well, I hope I didn't hurt you, young man?" questioned the baronet. He remembered the unfortunate violence of his temper, and hoped that the charming Mrs. Branksome had not heard too much. But of course she knew nothing, or she would not have brought them. The boy—a nice boy—must not talk too much.

Bob was given half a crown to take him on his way more righteously.

"Thanks awfully," said that young gentleman, "and you didn't hurt me a bit." Which mortified Sir Joseph.

Farewells were said, and to the relief of the children they were soon out upon the main road again. Mother had had her fun, and had secured the promise of substantial assistance for her charitable enterprise. So they were a merry party driving homewards.

It was growing dusk, and they had been away longer than Mrs. Branksome had intended, and rain was beginning to fall. They drove, therefore, in the direction of "The Cedars" in order to restore the two Dickinsons to the bosom of a family which had probably been expecting them for some time.

Bob spoke little on the way back. His conscience was troubling him. Ought he to own that he had abstracted the ladder which had constituted Aunt Susan's sole practicable means of return to earth? Undoubtedly he ought, but whether or no he should do so was a question that was finally settled in the negative, by the simple expedient of allowing it to remain in doubt until Mrs. Branksome, Mary and Dick were on their way homewards from "The Cedars."

It was dark before they reached home, but when they returned they found confusion regnant in the household.

Chapter XIII.

A Cold in the Head.

The inevitable had happened. The exhilaration of the drive, the application of his mind to the mysterious documents upon his desk, the comfort of the armchair, and a general sense of well-being—all these things had lulled Mr. Branksome to the realm of forgetfulness. If the approach of sleep were slow, it was sure, and Mr. Branksome had slept.

He was awakened by Jenny, who entered the library unceremoniously and with haste.

"Please, sir," she exclaimed, "Miss Branksome's up a tree."

"What," demanded Jenny's master, shaking himself, and pretending that he was not just roused from slumber, "What do you say ? "

"Miss Branksome's up a tree, sir," Jenny repeated.

What did the girl mean ?

"Really, Jenny," said Mr. Branksome, with becoming severity, "I cannot have you using such slang expressions to me. This is not the kitchen, and 'up a tree' is not at all a suitable way of speaking to me. What do you mean ? "

"But, please, sir, she is up a tree, up the elm tree in the garden, sir."

"Oh," said Mr. Branksome, light dawning at last,

"you mean Miss Mary, I thought you were referring to my Aunt, so of course I didn't think you were speaking literally."

"Please, sir, I do mean Miss Branksome, sir, not Miss Mary, sir, and she is up the tree, and she's very angry, sir, and wants to be got down."

"Miss Branksome; but how on earth did she get up there?" demanded that lady's incredulous nephew. He pinched his leg to see if he were really awake.

"I don't know, sir," Jenny replied, "she wouldn't tell me. But she wants to come down, sir. She says she's caught her death with 'pewmonia,' sir."

Thoroughly roused to an appreciation of the fearful facts of the case, Mr. Branksome, still doubting his wakefulness, went forth, through the dark and drizzle, to the rescue of his aunt, and Jenny retired to tell the amazing news to the household.

She had gone, in the usual course of her duty, to make ready the children's room for the night. When in the midst of her preparations Jenny's heart had stood still. She had never quite recovered from the shock of her night of fear, and now from the very same direction as before she heard a weird unnatural noise. The cawing of some disembodied raven might have resembled the sound she heard.

Jenny listened, and the strange voice called faintly "Help, help." At once Jenny knew what had happened. She had ever been suspicious that some more terrifying creature than owls had been in the garden if the truth were told, on the historic night, and here was proof at last. Mr. Branksome had deliberately deceived them. Now, this unknown person out there was in the clutches of the supernatural.

With unaccustomed bravery, fortified by a sense of pride in her own courage, Jenny peered out of the window cautiously. The call was repeated, evidently from the tree. Jenny looked and saw—something large and dark and floating in the midst of the branches. With a scream she was shutting the window when, in more human tones, the tones of desperation, came the cry "Help, you fool."

The voice in a most singular manner resembled that of "Old Susan," as Jenny was wont to call the worthy spinster.

Thus a parley had taken place during which with emphasis and precision, Aunt Susan had explained her present need for assistance.

Not for the world would Jenny have gone into the garden herself, but she compromised, as has been seen, by explaining the situation to her master.

It was gall and wormwood to the unfortunate Aunt Susan to have to parley at such an undignified disadvantage with the servant. But it was the merest straw—though the last one—as compared with the indignity she had suffered throughout the long hours of her captivity.

Earlier in the afternoon, she had been vaguely and deliciously conscious of the children going off to play hide-and-seek. She had slept happily, and had not remembered anything of Bob's final return. Even after waking she sat on contentedly for a while, blissfully unconscious of having been severed from earth.

Eventually, however, the moment arrived when Aunt Susan, who began to feel that the children should have returned, proposed to descend the ladder.

Cautiously she shifted her position, and casting

gratified eyes around to see that none should observe these unaccustomed manœuvres, Aunt Susan slid to the parting of the branches, where the top of the ladder should have been. Suspended between earth and heaven, Aunt Susan gasped as she saw her retreat cut off. She cast anxious eyes around to see if any were near to help her. She called upon the children individually and collectively, and receiving no answer, hurled collective maledictions upon them. Never had she been in so ridiculous a situation. Only once during the time that elapsed between her awakening and the appearance of Jenny had she seen a living soul. Then the gardener's boy had come in sight, but as the said boy had on previous occasions been reproved for various misdemeanours by Aunt Susan, and had displayed an inclination towards impertinence, she hesitated to risk the ridicule which might have followed his knowledge of her situation—and was lost.

Time dragged on, and almost blushing with the warmth of her indignation against the family—each member of which was happily content with the contentment of the ignorant—Aunt Susan mentally deleted every clause in her last will and testament that advantageously related to her host and his offspring.

The lighting of the children's room had at last aroused the unfortunate lady from a semi-conscious condition, induced alike by the depression of her spirits and the drizzling rain that had set in with the darkness. A veritable beacon! "Help," she shouted hoarsely. She saw Jenny within the lighted room stand still, and eventually come with frightened face to the window. "Help," she repeated. Then Jenny's

scream and the threat of the closing window; was she to be left out there for the night? Clearly the rest of the family, doubtless within those comfortable walls, cared nothing for her; but this servant should not flout her to her face; when once she, with Jenny, were on solid ground, Aunt Susan would know how to take care of herself.

All these thoughts flashing through her mind with cumulative force, humanised the cry that Jenny heard—"Help, you fool!"

Had she been feeling devout, Aunt Susan would have offered a prayer of gratitude as she saw the window opened again and Jenny peer forth.

"Who are you?" came the voice from the window.

"It's I . . . I'm in the tree here," replied Aunt Susan, with modest hesitation.

"In the tree . . . who do you say?" queried Jenny again.

"I am Miss . . . Branksome, and I have been kept here for hours. . . ."

The words were enunciated clearly to add dignity to the situation.

"Miss Branksome!" exclaimed Jenny, not a little surprised as she bent further out of the window to see more clearly this phenomenon of "Old Susan" up a tree.

"Yes, Miss Branksome," returned that exasperated lady, "and don't stay staring there all night. I've got my death now with pneumonia, and do you want me to be worse! Go and tell your . . . master," she continued with restraint. After all she could abuse the man to his face while life was still in her.

Presently a light was seen coming round the corner of the house, and from its direction came Mr.

Branksome's voice, choked by the repression of his emotions.

"Aunt Susan," he called, "Where are you ?"

"Who is with you ? " demanded Aunt Susan from her perch.

"Nobody," returned her nephew.

"That's a good thing," came the response shot from the tree. "Where am I ? " Aunt Susan continued rhetorically, "I'm in this elm tree. The next place I shall be in will be my coffin. But *you* won't care, none of you will care. How dare you leave me here for *hours* ? "

"But I should never have thought of your being there," expostulated Mr. Branksome. "Why did you climb up there ? "

"Climbed up here ? Do you think I came up by myself ? Is it probable ? I was lured here, lured I say, and left here to catch my death. Those miserable children of yours made me climb that ladder, and then removed it, and here I am."

"Oh," said Mr. Branksome, his voice quavering with mirth. At last he comprehended the meaning of the unusual situation. "But the children went out with Clare in the dogcart," he explained, "and haven't come back. They probably forgot about you." This last was unwise.

"Forgot, yes. Why should they remember ? Of course they forgot. And Clare forgot and you forgot. I shall not forget." "Oh . h . h . . .," she concluded. The tide of eloquence had so moved her that a foot slipped, and Aunt Susan was compelled to adopt an unbecoming attitude with one unsupported foot dangling from her resting place.

Mr. Branksome's usual promptitude in action

had deserted him. He wondered if this adventure would ever terminate.

"Well," demanded Aunt Susan, having recovered her breath, "do you intend to get me down, sir, or are you going to keep me here all night?"

"My dear Aunt," replied the unhappy man, suddenly galvanised into action. "No. I will get you down."

"Thank you," said the spinster with calm, cold sarcasm.

So Aunt Susan descended the ladder, and once on solid earth again she marched without a word to the house. She was placed before a fire, and was plied with hot stimulants, while her room and bed were prepared for her immediate—and, she maintained, her last—reception.

It was in the midst of these preparations that Mrs. Branksome and the children had returned—the latter being tactfully smuggled upstairs by Mr. Branksome, who discovered to his relief that they were guiltless of the abstraction of the ladder. Probably, he thought, the gardener's boy, who should receive his *congé*, had been the culprit. Meanwhile, Mrs. Branksome, being briefly acquainted with the situation, had gone, with face stern and sympathetic, to Aunt Susan's side.

It was certainly not unpleasant to find oneself before the grateful warmth of a fire, to have a charming presence shedding sympathy and understanding upon a wounded spirit, and to have another appreciate the martyrdom to which one had been subject.

The mother further assured Aunt Susan that neither of her children could have been, nor, in point of fact, had been, the cause of her captivity. She

told also—may she be forgiven—of nice appreciative things the children had said concerning the ill-used lady, in the course of their drive.

Thus the tension was less by the time that Mr. Branksome, after some delay, came back shamefacedly to the room. He looked at Aunt Susan. She looked at him, and then the ghost of a smile gleamed in her eyes as she said,

"Clare is a very dear woman."

Nevertheless, that evening Aunt Susan retired to her bed with a very bad cold in her head.

Chapter XIV.

Conscience.

The next morning, Mr. Branksome thought he would make it his business to drive over to The Cedars on the pretext of seeking Mr. Dickinson's advice upon some matter of local interest, but, in reality, primarily to see for himself what effect an account of Aunt Susan's state of health—a wonderfully sound state, all things considered—would have upon one member especially, of the Dickinson family. Circumstantial evidence certainly implicated Bob in the cold from which Aunt Susan was making rapid recovery.

There was laughter in Mr. Branksome's face as he pulled up at the house which sheltered Bob. This, however, was lost upon that young gentleman, who observed the arrival from an upper window. Bob's heart sank at the sight. The tortured imaginings of the night that was gone arose vividly before his mind again.

The night had been a troubled one. Conscience when awake and about its duty—does it ever sleep? —is not conducive to slumber. Bob had lain wrestling with this indwelling mentor at an hour when normally he would have been sound asleep.

As he lay staring at the grey expanse that was the ceiling above him, he could hear faintly sounds

of mirth from below. The dinner party in progress downstairs only served to emphasise the unhappy condition of his own mind.

The dinner party was, however, responsible for the fact that Bob had been able to postpone, till so late an hour, the inevitable face to face reckoning with the facts of his crime of the afternoon.

In the manner of children of his age, he had displayed unbounded interest and admiration for his Mother's smart toilette. He was conscious during the ceremony of adornment of a secret desire—too shameful to be expressed—that his own sex might on occasion be permitted to bedeck themselves in the glories of silks and shining finery. Bob had enjoyed a fancy dress function of his earlier youth, at which he had appeared as a Cavalier. The silk stockings had been so wonderfully cool and exciting. There he had met a little girl clad in yellow as a daffodil, and to her he had confided . . . That, however, is a digression.

Meanwhile, he was content to see his Mother assume the splendour of a new gown, and then, sparkling, gushing and beautiful, she descended to receive her guests.

Later, Bob had awaited the dismissal of each successive course from the dining-room, and in the library had qualified himself to express a judgment upon the respective merit of the various dishes. This has been done before by other children.

Despite his seclusion, however, Bob had been brought prominently before the notice of his father's guests, as they were finishing the entrée. It had consisted of a delicacy particularly palatable to Mr. Dickinson, who, although more or less continuously

in a state of weak health, was on occasion not above the enjoyment of good food. Having finished the course somewhat rapidly, he regretted his abstemiousness at its commencement, and signified to his wife that he could find it in his heart to enjoy a second helping. Encouraged by this unusual tribute to her menage, Mrs. Dickinson despatched a servant to retrieve the vanished dish.

But, alas! the short and harrassed life of that entrée was at an end. Not one of its component parts survived. It had found, poor complex thing, a resting place in . . . well, in the library. Its destiny was fulfilled.

Thus the maid had returned empty handed and confided to her mistress that "Master Bob had finished it in the library."

The maid, loyal, sympathetic soul, had not intended that this information should reach the ear of the assembled company. Mr. Sykes, the vicar, was however, upon Mrs. Dickinson's right hand. In much earlier days Bob had been known to speak of the reverend gentleman as "Mr. Heaven." Hereafter, however, no appellation would more inaccurately interpret Bob's thoughts of him. Mr. Sykes heard the servant's remarks, and wholly failing to realise the secretive nature of the information, gladly seized the opportunity of adding to the gaiety of the party by recounting the fate of the entrée.

But at length the last of the sweets had been sampled. Bob had put in a somewhat shame-faced appearance at dessert, had glared vindictively at the vicar, whose perfidy had been reported by the servants, and had repulsed the manifestly untrustworthy advances made by that gentleman towards

him. Finally he had said good-night, and so had gone to bed. To bed, not to sleep, but to wrestle with a foe more insistent than his reverend betrayer downstairs. The great stentorian tones of the vicar, in which he himself took no small amount of pride, echoing from time to time throughout the house, were as the cooing of a turtle-dove, when compared with the persistence of the still small voice of conscience which kept Bob awake.

What, he had wondered, might the unfortunate Aunt Susan not be suffering at that present moment. It certainly must have been funny to have seen the victim of his crime unable to reach the ground! The bed shook as he thought of it. But Bob had heard his mother speak of catching his, her or its "death of cold" too often to be unconscious of the fatal possibilities which might eventuate from his act of mischief in the afternoon.

Would Aunt Susan "catch her death"? It would be his fault. Would she, if escaping this most drastic fate, be invalided for the remainder of her days? It would be his fault. Bob, too, knew something of the horrors of perpetual invalidism. To be responsible for such a fate in another would be unspeakable. All sense of humour departed before such imaginings. Bob sweated as he lay. He revolved in his mind all manner of ways and means of allaying his fears. He tried to drown them in sleep, but failed. He thought of confessing the whole affair to his father, but the vision—and the sound—of Mr. Sykes came before him and quenched the half-formed resolution.

He considered whether he should not go even then and see for himself if Aunt Susan had been rescued.

He weighed the pros and cons of this course, till at long last kindly sleep overtook him.

His dreams were a confused mass of horrible events revolving around her emaciated ghost. With black shirts flapping in the wind she came in horrid spirit form to dog his footsteps and to bring retribution upon him. Or, again, he was fixed in a prickly tree round the base of which danced a hundred mocking devils, whilst at the end of a slender thorny branch along which he was shortly to be made to walk a hangman's noose was being prepared which should put a just end to his criminal career.

Small wonder, therefore, that Bob had been silent at breakfast that morning, that he was moody and distrait as he looked vaguely from that upper window later on, and that his heart failed him as he saw Mr. Branksome, an emissary of justice, drive towards the house in his dogcart. Small wonder, also, that he failed to detect the smile that lurked in Mr. Branksome's eye as he drew up at the front door.

Bob went to the head of the stairs and heard Mr. Branksome go into the library—scene of many and varied experiences—and he waited as it seemed to him interminably before the inevitable summons should come for him to appear and to explain his wickedness.

Five eternal minutes dragged heavily by. Ten, twelve—and a message came to him asking that he would go down to the library and "don't keep the master waiting."

Bob shut his teeth, straightened his back, entered the library, and closing the door stood defiantly looking at his father and Mr. Branksome.

"Bob," expostulated the former, "do you intend

to eat us? Say 'how do you do' to Mr. Branksome."

Bob complied with relief.

There was laughter in Mr. Branksome's face, which, this time, Bob noticed.

A reassuring grasp of his hand restored the boy's confidence, and the impending picnic which had served as Mr. Branksome's ostensible reason for bringing him down, was satisfactorily arranged.

Bob's curiosity was aroused, and was apparently not to be allayed by any information Mr. Branksome seemed prepared to impart. So vaguely, and shifting his weight from one foot to another, he asked, "Are they all all right?"

"Yes, thanks, Bob," responded the smiling visitor, "My wife's very fit and Mary and Dick."

"And Aunt . . . I mean Miss Branksome?" queried Bob with courage.

"Really very decent of Bob," thought his father. "Odd, too, to ask after the old lady. Perhaps he really wanted more news of Mary." He chuckled quietly. Mr. Branksome's response was audible.

"Well, unfortunately," he said slowly, with his eyes on Bob, "unfortunately she caught a bad cold yesterday. She was out in the garden with you, wasn't she?"

"Yes," said Bob, and he shifted his weight back on to the original foot.

Mr. Branksome rose to go.

"Good-bye, Dickinson," he said, "don't bother to get up to ring; Bob will see me out I'm sure."

"Good-bye," replied Bob's father, "very glad to see you, and shall be at any time. Open the door, Bob."

So the big man and the small boy came, not without constraint, to the front door.

"Good-bye, Bob," said the big man.

"Good-bye," said the small boy, "Good-bye and . . . Oh, Mr. Branksome, I'm awfully sorry about Aunt . . . I mean Miss Branksome."

"That she has a cold ? "

"No ! " replied Bob. "It's my fault, I . . . I took away the ladder and I expect that is why . . . "

Mr. Branksome's eye twinkled, and, seeing it, Bob broke off in the midst of his confession.

"You know I did," he added, "and I'm sorry, but she was asleep and I thought I should be back. . . "

The excuse betrayed a certain lack of deep conviction in Bob's sorrow. There were at least extenuating circumstances.

"Well," said Mr. Branksome, taking Bob's hand in his own, "I did *wonder* if you had done it. She really might have had a very bad cold, you know. When she . . . came down I got a fearful wigging."

He did not think it well for Bob's sense of reverence for aged spinsters that the details of Aunt Susan's return to earth should be given him in full.

"Oh, I am sorry," said Bob, smilingly sincere.

"Bob," said Mr. Branksome, bending to confide the inmost secret of his heart, "don't ever tell anyone I said so, but it was a tremendous joke, and I'd have done it myself if I dared."

Bob looked down the drive after the dogcart had vanished from sight and sound.

"He must be an awfully nice man for a father," he murmured to himself.

He thought of the invalid in the library, blinked his eyes twice, and went to sort a pile of letters for his father.

Chapter XV.

About Nothing in Particular.

The beginning of the end of one of Aunt Susan's visits was usually marked by an announcement of her early departure so made as to necessitate, for the sake of common civility, a pressing invitation for her to remain.

"Clare, my dear," she would say on arriving down for breakfast, "it came over me in the night that you and Henry were just longing to see my back"—protestation would be drowned with great firmness—"So I shall go—nothing will deter me—I shall positively go on Saturday."

This on Monday morning.

Clare and Henry would, of course, expostulate, dispel her illusion, and by Friday the entire incident would be forgotten—by one, at least, of the three persons concerned.

"What does Aunt Susan mean by 'deter me'?" Mary had asked on such an occasion, after the meal and the discussion were ended.

"Budge," said her father, enigmatically. Fortunately they two were alone.

Whilst Mr. Branksome had been over to The Cedars, however, Aunt Susan had been digesting her breakfast in the privacy of her bedroom, and it was not until lunch time that she appeared in public.

"Henry," she said, "Jenny is packing my things. Would you be kind enough to drive me to the station this afternoon ? "

"This afternoon ? " he said, "You are surely not going to-day ? "

"My dear Henry," continued the spinster, "I am not leaving in any unkind frame of mind, but if after yesterday you really are surprised that I should go as soon as I am able, you are more foolish than I think."

"Oh, but you know I'm really very sorry that you should have been kept up . . . in that unfortunate position, but you mustn't think it was by design. I'm sure we . . . "

"By design ? Of course it was . . . and it wasn't. Now don't interrupt. That objectionable boy, what's his name, did it. And then Clare took him off for a drive.

"That's just how it was," exclaimed Mr. Branksome, secretly admiring the old lady's acuteness.

"Of course," she said.

"Well, if you know that, why . . . punish us by going ? We didn't do it," urged the one who would have done it himself had he dared.

"My dear Henry, when you are my age, you will know that having once been made ridiculous in the eyes of servants and children it is best to go away until they have forgotten about it. You have been very kind, and if you ask me, I'll come again —after a decent interval."

"Bob was very penitent," said Mr. Branksome.

"So he ought to be," affirmed the spinster. "After all I like the boy," she added. "You would never have done it, Henry."

"Oh, wouldn't I? . . . I mean of course I wouldn't," retorted her nephew.

"No," she said, "you haven't got the pluck."

Mr. Branksome jumped perceptibly. He answered the smile on her face, and covered one of her hands with his own.

"You come back again soon, and see if I daren't," he said.

"I would," suddenly exclaimed Dick, who had heard with amazement the story from Jenny.

"Then I should spank you," said Aunt Susan decisively, and Dick made no further remark.

Thus it was that Aunt Susan departed without, ultimately, having lost any of the prestige which had been hers from all time.

That afternoon she was, in due course, safely seated in the dogcart beside Mr. Branksome who held the reins, and when the last sign of waving handkerchiefs had been lost owing to the bend in the drive, conversation was lulled until they should pass out of the gateway.

Arrived there, they found a boy standing uneasily beside his bicycle as if in doubt as to which direction he should pursue. The boy was Bob. Conscience had triumphed; he had come to make his apologies. The mare shied as she saw him. Mr. Branksome pulled up. Aunt Susan's upper lip drew down.

"Oh," said Bob, shuffling his feet, "How do you do? I'm . . . I'm very glad to see you, Miss Branksome."

"You may well be surprised, young man, as well as glad," returned Aunt Susan.

Bob was certainly surprised to see her on the

point of departure, but he said : "I didn't mean to leave you up the . . . "

"Bother the tree," said the spinster, forestalling the repetition of a phrase she was coming to abhor. "No, I know you didn't," she continued more mildly, "come to the station with us."

So the peace was made, and eventually the injured lady departed homewards, and Bob had five shillings in his pocket.

"I know it's encouraging the boy in evil courses. Put it in the missionary box," Aunt Susan said to Mr. Branksome and the boy respectively.

"Thanks awfully," said Bob ; and then, "would you give Mr. Branksome five bob if he had done it ? "

The train drowned Aunt Susan's reply.

Having gone, however, the unique position occupied by Aunt Susan in the hearts of her family was demonstrated by the evident gap she had left in the household. Aunt Susan's was an impressive personality, and could not be withdrawn without necessitating a reaction among those who remained behind.

The tree-climbing incident, too, had deeply impressed Dick and Mary, and in their souls was renewed an ardent desire for further perfection in this art. Dirty, torn and bruised, they would get in their usually fruitless attempts to ascend the dizzy heights of the garden world. Dick found the new sport beyond him, and this fact whetted Mary's appetite for conquest, which proved literally beyond the reach of her small brother. Bob was a gallant and able instructor.

Now it happened that within a few days the unhappy tidings reached the family of the death of the

grandmother who, in life had been at enmity with Aunt Susan, though with nobody else in the world.

Consequently, the usual trappings of death—new clothes for the survivors—were the order of the day, and, although not in black, the children assumed garments suitably suggestive of their grief. This was by no means imaginary, for the old lady had been genuinely fond of the children, and they of her. She had spoiled them, and had endeavoured to lay in them the foundations of permanent dyspepsia, as it is natural and right that grandmothers should do to their children's children. What would happen to the digestive organs of a great grandchild is, providentially, seldom demonstrated.

For this reason those who tell us how to live to be a hundred—they themselves rarely learn the lesson—are making an assault upon the doctrine of eugenics.

The kindly unwise old lady however, had not reached this age, and the children's grief had accordingly been softened by the assurance that "she had gone to live with God." Moreover, new clothes have their attractions even to the child mind. They have, nevertheless, disadvantages. They make tree climbing a forbidden pleasure.

It was in a garden that the first woman fell before temptation. A tree then was the cause of the trouble. So, too, being left in the garden alone save for a youthful descendant of Adam to keep her in the path of virtue—a broken reed as his forefather had been—the call of the trees proved the undoing of Mary.

Now, Mary, on the whole, was not an evil character. The outstanding crimes of her career—thought of with shame and contrition—had been the total

demolition of a bag of chocolate beans, intended for the joint use of Dick and herself, the eating of a bottleful of homeopathic pills, and the pouring of a bottle of eau-de-Cologne down her neck, coupled with a subsequent denial of all knowledge of the pungent stuff, despite the damning evidence of her clothes.

To-day she took the risk of spoiling yet another set of garments. Mrs. Branksome had said, in effect, "Ye shall not climb trees, neither shall ye touch them lest ye tear your clothes."

And the serpent said unto Mary, "Ye shall not surely tear your clothes."

So, Mary, seeing that trees were pleasant to the eyes, started to climb them—"just little easy ones, that can't possibly hurt."

If only her mother had realised how simple a matter this tree climbing really was she would never have forbidden it, new clothes notwithstanding.

It is the way of the world that the conquest of "little easy ones" should lead to larger efforts, and ere long Mary had clambered to perilous heights up forbidding trunks. Never had she been so agile, never had fingers and feet served her so faithfully.

Then the rain came, followed by instructions shouted from the house that they should return to its shelter. Mary came down the tree more quickly than she had ascended it, but when within two feet of the ground, she heard the ominous sound of a rent; and as she made her way to the house it was with a triangular tear in her frock.

Then was all the artillery of conscience brought to bear upon her. Supremely aware of a "sinking feeling" she went indoors.

All went well, however, and nurse sent her to change her clothes. Sent on a similar mission, Dick made a curious protest against such a proceeding on the ground that they had sung in Church a week ago of "a friend who never changes." Yet such is the inconsistency of the adult world that Dick was made to change.

Dick was, in fact, in the habit of finding somewhat unusual interpretations for sundry exhortations in the Hymn Book. Such possibility of misunderstanding—especially when, as in Dick's case, spelling is a matter of indifference to the singer—should be kept in mind by the writers of sacred songs.

For instance, on one occasion Dick had asked why nurse pursued the not uncommon custom of airing, on Saturday evening, the clothes the children would assume next morning.

"I don't think it's right," he had declared. "The hymn says 'Ere the *Sabbath* evening close'."

This afternoon, however, Mary had no desire to raise difficulties. She changed with expedition and alacrity.

That accomplished, she decided that confession would be too great a humiliation, and that she would attempt to repair the damage herself. Nothing venture, nothing win.

Her fingers retained their agility of half an hour before, and Mary darned the rent in her dress with a skill that surpassed her dearest hopes. It was slow work, but she found her reward in it.

"Look," she said at length triumphantly to Dick, "you can't see it."

"I can," asserted Dick emphatically.

But nurse failed to notice it, and so the wicked

went unpunished. For when, days after, Mother saw it, she discerned the merit of the darning, and the anguish of soul which had prompted it, and said nothing.

Yet it was not until she was in bed, that Mary, that night, felt secure. She thought, even then, of her departed grandparent, who was largely responsible in the matter. The memory had been revived by Dick—deeply impressed by "Grandmamma having gone to be with God." His devotions had terminated abruptly. "Bless Father and Mother and Grandpa and Gr— Oh! how is Grandmamma getting on ? " . . .

Dick was sent to bed without enlightenment.

Chapter XVI.

Cricket.

Cricket was the common ground upon which Bob and the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall had established a friendship—cricket and a mutual admiration for Mary.

They had met at a local match, and a common interest had served as introduction. It was only after some interval that they discovered that they possessed also mutual friends.

Bob, at the game, was certainly superior to the boy. In the result both found satisfaction so far as Mary was concerned—the one in this superiority, and the other in his inferiority at cricket. It seemed obvious that Bob should be pleased with the state of affairs. Clearly any healthy-minded maiden would appreciate his greater merit as a player. The boy's satisfaction on the other hand, was somewhat more subtle in origin.

When games were arranged between them and the Branksome children—as in due course occurred, at the Dickinson's—Mary was found to be unquestionably more useful than Dick.

Consequently, Mary and the boy would be comrades against the superior Bob and Dick, with possibly Molly, whose aptitude for the game was not marked, thrown in as a make-weight on both sides.

Her innings she would take with the utmost seriousness, and perhaps on the analogy of "rounders" she would invariably run at about her third stroke—an "air stroke," the youthful golfer in "Punch" would have called it—if she survived so far.

When nominally fielding, she would be sent to the long field—to be out of the way—and there she would make daisy chains to her heart's content. Consequently, a large portion of her proper work fell to the bowler. Sometimes, of course, she would become violently excited, especially if Dick happened to score, but since she was bound to be upon the winning side—she lost sight of the fact that no power could save her also from defeat—excessive partisanship was not to be expected of her.

Dick, on his part, was usually allotted a post behind the wicket. Bob discovered that to place "the kids" in too close proximity tended to distract their attention from the matter in hand—cricket or the making of daisy chains.

Now cricket is a great game, and much laudatory matter has been written on the subject. But it has its disadvantages. When one player is exceedingly difficult to dislodge, and when at length—his innings possibly having been "declared"—he takes in hand the ball and you the bat ; when too, the ball—the same miserably incompetent ball that you had used—developes a deadly and persistent tendency to dodge your bat, but not to dodge the wicket—the selfsame wicket that it *would* not touch before ; when, in consequence it is all too soon your turn again to take in hand the ball ; when it is single-wicket cricket you are playing and the day is hot ; then it is that some have felt that cricket has its disadvantages.

Such was the tendency of the game as played by Mary and Dick, Bob, Molly and the boy-on-the-other-side-of-the-garden-wall. Consequently, in order that the reputation of the national pastime should not suffer, other methods were resorted to.

County matches were instituted. In an incredibly short space of time, the name of every cricketer of repute was known to them. The varying merits of each under particular conditions of play were matter for the deepest consideration. Team-building was quite as harrassing for the rival captains as for the M.C.C. Committee before a Test Match. The final selection was never made until the moment arrived to spin the decisive coin.

To their intense regret the children inhabited a county never known in the annals of cricket that counts. They saw no redeeming feature in this misfortune, and vowed that when their turn came they would work faithfully to gain a place among the Olympians. Nevertheless, it made it easier for them to represent counties not their own than it would have been in the case of one side having to do battle against their native territory.

Worcestershire, Middlesex, Kent, were favourite teams, Yorkshire and Lancashire having high claims. In the case of the last-named, Molly would always insist on being "Tiddlesley."

Frequently, not content with County matches, Test matches would be arranged, but here, as loyal Englishmen all, they found it more difficult to be reconciled to representing our dominions beyond the sea. The method of play was in this wise.

The boy-on-the-other-side—he may be called John for short, this having been his name from infancy—

would perhaps open the innings for Australia. Impersonating one of the famous players of that country, he would quite possibly be defeated by a world-famous fast bowler—alias Bob—and Mary, conscious of having to maintain some one else's great reputation, would come to the wicket.

At the end of an over, another bowler would be "on," though he bore a striking resemblance to his predecessor.

Mary out, John would re-appear representing, perhaps, the chief hope of the side.

So the few would appear and re-appear under the guise of the many until the orthodox number of wickets had fallen, and the innings was at an end.

Molly was only allowed one innings to every two of her fellow combatants, but this was equalised by her being upon the batting list of each side. Moreover, she gained also in having fewer in the field than the others, it being obviously difficult for her to be in the long field during her own innings. Yet a question of great complexity arose once, when the ball ran up her bat and lodged in her frock. Bob protested that Molly as Jessop had caught Molly as Gregory out!

Gregory, however, wept, so that Jessop, being chivalrous, relented.

This on the whole proved an admirable way of playing the great game, and ensured some continuity of batting to the weaker side. Also, since it was obviously impossible to hope that Bob would successively be dismissed for a reasonable score, a limit was set to the total which might be aggregated by any side of honour in a single innings.

There was one glorious occasion upon which Dick

had scored six. So vast a total he had never compiled before. Four had been the result of an overthrow by John, who was not pleased. Dick's exaltation, on the other hand, was unbounded.

Molly, faithful admirer of the batsman, was so elated that she materially contributed to the increase of his score, for it was she who should have returned the ball to John.

When the game was over, Dick was given a reward that any man living might have been proud to receive—Molly kissed him. This in public, and Dick blushed.

Yet, sacrilege of sacrilege, he rubbed his hand across the cheek upon which the precious token had been bestowed!

John, being susceptible in such matters, and sensible still of that foolish overthrow, fell upon Dick.

"Pretty rude," he declared, "to rub off a kiss like that."

"I didn't," retorted Dick, "I . . . "

Dick's accuser cut him short, "Oh, you crammer," he said, "I saw you. So did Molly."

Now this last was not true. Nevertheless, whether from fear of a fight or of perfidy on Dick's part, Molly's face showed ominous creases.

Dick, red and determined, declined any further explanation.

Further developments, were, however, prohibited by the appearance on the scene of the Dickinson gardener who was well nigh apoplectic with displeasure. He made for Bob, like a whirlwind—if an apoplectic whirlwind is within the sphere of the imagination.

Bob, without asking why or wherefore, fled before his face.

He was not, in fact, altogether taken by surprise. He had felt morally certain since the previous afternoon that some such display of wrath would descend upon him. Nor was the experience precisely a novel one.

A feud of some months standing existed between Bob and the gardener. The latter's left eye had a permanent roving commission which had little or no relation to the duties of its more hardworking companion. It carried out the spirit of the injunction which bids the right hand remain in ignorance of the left hand's doings, by looking in the opposite direction. This fact probably accounted for an instinctive aversion which Bob cherished towards the gardener. In the earlier days he had pandered his dislike by following his victim when he was bedding out geraniums, and by rooting up each and every plant in turn, at discreet intervals after their interment. He laid them with infinite pains strictly in line—just ready for bedding out! The gardener's more responsible eye did not discern the devastation wrought by Bob until at length it turned with pride to take in the cumulative effect of a complete row of the vivid hued flowers.

The ill-used man scored at a later date by giving Bob some Morello cherries—red and exquisitely luscious in appearance—which he ate to his subsequent great discontent.

"Bob groaned in the night," as his Mother told a friend afterwards. But she thought Bob had taken the cherries illicitly, and that this was but just retribution.

It was retribution, but for another sin.

Now, once again, Bob's turn had come. He had perpetrated his worst and most wanton crime. Having recently been presented with a box of tools, he had kept open a vigilant eye for suitable opportunities of using them.

There was in Bob's nature a destructive vein which was evinced when in his extreme youth he cut out with care the pretty pattern of some new lace curtains. These maturer years found him still a victim to the same propensity. Therefore, having grown weary of boring holes with his gimlet in the water-butt, he had sawn—almost completely—through one handle of a new garden wheelbarrow.

The result had been more thoroughly satisfactory than he had hoped. His subsequent regrets—subsequent, that is to say, upon his renewed ability to sit with ease, a feat he found difficult for some time after parental admonition that evening—were entirely owing to the fact that he had been playing cricket when the gardener "broke" the handle of the wheelbarrow.

He had been taking some carefully collected rubbish to the place of a perpetual bonfire at the bottom of the garden, when the disaster occurred which upset both the rubbish and his temper.

It was with this in mind that the "whirlwind" had appeared. It was with this in mind that Bob had fled at his appearing.

In the disturbance that followed Mary and Dick sought the greater quietude of home.

Before departing, however, Dick found Molly.

"I wasn't going to tell John," he said, in explanation of his apparent rudeness—now forgotten in the

face of more pressing events—"but I was rubbing it *in*."

Whereupon followed further osculation, the memory of which abode with Dick throughout the evening. Perhaps it influenced his conduct, for even the progress to bed found him unusually complacent. And in summer time, Dick seldom approved of going to bed.

The previous evening he had—compulsorily—retired to rest in disgrace, it having transpired that he had occupied himself in the dining room by taking one bite out of every item of dessert which was exposed upon the sideboard.

So to-night his cherubic complacency was the more noticeable.

"Dick, dear," Nurse was prompted to say—wishing to point a moral—"why aren't you always good like this ? Everyone would love you so much."

Dick's back stiffened and he slid from the capacious lap of nurse. Obviously he had been foolishly weak. He must display his independence.

"I know someone who wouldn't," he said, argumentatively.

"Oh, no, Dick," expostulated his astonished nurse.

"Yes, I do," retorted Dick decisively, "the Devil ! "

Chapter XVII.

The Turning of the Leaves.

Midas made a great mistake when he sought and found the Philosopher's stone. It is not well that everything in all the world should turn to gold. It is a saddening process. Had Dick, tattered and begrimed, as the result of some adventure in the garden, been transmuted into the precious metal, his Mother would have wept, despite his shining beauty.

Perhaps that is why we are loth to welcome the lovely transmutation when nature takes in hand the magic stone no living Midas ever found.

Nature's miracle was being wrought, summer had merged into autumn, and the blessed green of the garden was being changed to gold.

Until the leaves had turned, the Branksomes, lovers of the open, had tried to cheat themselves into the belief that the summer would never grow old. And now it was gone. The changed colour of the trees symbolised its passage.

One Sunday morning in early September, Dick was sitting in Church beside his mother. They were unusually early. Presently, in his ear, Dick heard the voice of a sympathetic if irreverent friend who dwelt in the pew behind.

"Dick, how long have you been wearing collars ? " said the voice.

"They were only bought yesterday," Dick whispered back self-consciously.

The texture of his garments symbolised the passing of Dick's infancy.

These garments, in fact, monopolised Dick's attention during the service. He felt that in one short half hour before breakfast that morning he had made a great stride towards ultimate manhood.

When, earlier in the year, he had watched the evolution in the garden pond of the tadpole into the frog he had appreciated the significance of the season at which the final absorption of the tail had taken place. Not till then had the tadpole become a "proper frog"—diminutive, but undoubtedly a frog.

So, Dick felt, had he become a "proper" man, clad in tweed and stiff linen. The tail, linking him with infancy, was absorbed, and it was but a matter of time before he, like the apostle, should put away childish things.

Dick looked vaguely forward through the years and anticipated that time with pleasure.

Not so the Mother by his side. Until Dick's garments had changed, Mrs. Branksome, lover of children, had tried to cheat herself into the belief that her children would never grow old. Now, the little tweed suit beside her and the linen collar were symbolic also to her.

Not for her, as for Dick, did they signify the glorious coming of freedom and enterprise, but rather the breaking of those bonds by which she loved to bind her children to her.

Yet she knew, as Dick knew vaguely, that his

manhood was but a matter of time. She knew that no present tightening of those bonds would avail to hold her children in leash in the coming years. Rather she knew, a wise and kindly lightening of her hands as the days went by would tend to lengthen—even for life—her holding of the reins.

Thus Mrs. Branksome, too, paid little heed to the sermon on that Sunday morning. Yet, when she prayed it was with a more than usual fervour.

The serious thoughts of mother and son which resulted from the stiffening of the latter's collars were in contrast to the levity with which the circumstance inspired Mary. Sisters are seldom sentimental over their brother's clothing. She gibed at him for his self-consciousness, vowed he must be careful not to soil such precious emblems of maturity, and declared that wrath with her would instantly deny the manhood which his clothing implied.

Mary, in fact, annoyed Dick, who eventually so forgot himself as to call his sister a "silly fool."

Mary, having been to Church, gave Dick a solemn warning as to the use of so strong a term, whereupon Dick, although with qualms for his rash speech, quoted to Mary the necessity for clearing her vision as obstructive beams. She had called him a "fool" before now. This silenced Mary, though Dick now as ever failed to understand how anyone kept away from the oculist who carried a beam in his eye. Yet even a beam would be as nothing when floating in a moat such as he had seen at the Tower.

Yet, again, this was not the sense of his quotation ; but incomprehensible as it was, thereby he achieved his desired end. Mary was silenced.

Thus on this Sunday morning a new era in Dick's

history was ushered in, a season when pause and contemplation are proper. So at this point the narrative concerning him and his halts.

Yet the world goes on, and nature which was transmuting green leaves to gold, and changing children's clothing into stouter stuff, thus calling the attention of Dick's family to the onward march of Time, was performing similar miracles in the Dickinson scheme of things. Change was Bob's portion, as it was Dick's.

Bob's serious school life was to begin. Bob was immensely important.

As the days went by and the new life drew nearer he became increasingly self-contained. Dick, Molly and—well, yes, Mary must be made to feel that he was about to tread a new and exalted path in which only in their dreams they could follow him.

Some day, from an achieved position, he would again be able to associate, on terms, with "the kids" as in the long summer just fading away.

Before that time came, had he but known it, he would have passed through some humiliating experiences during which he would have felt anything but exalted. But of this Bob was in ignorance.

So as the summer died a halo grew around Bob's head, and if sometimes, when the loneliness of exile made the heart faint, the halo became a martyr's crown, usually it was a wreath of laurels.

Eventually the day of his departure dawned. He had gone the previous evening to bid farewell to the Branksomes.

A contribution to his "tuck box" from Dick's Mother had helped matters. There was after all little to be said. The days of freedom had been days

of happiness which somehow it was sad to leave behind. So speech was somewhat difficult. The visit, therefore, was not prolonged.

The seal to Bob's hero-worship of Mr. Branksome was set by the strength and stimulus of his handshake at the gate. It nerved Bob for his adventure into the world—the handshake, apart altogether from the thing that passed between them.

The morning arrived cloudless and bright. The last biscuit was stowed away in the tuck box, the last piece of practical advice had been given, and—temporally at least—forgotten, the final secret look into every room had been taken.

This last was sheer weakness and stupidity Bob knew. For some subtle change must, he felt, inevitably come over the appearance of the house when he was gone. He could not believe that everything would in semblance be exactly the same, so he impressed each detail upon his mind for future comparison.

At the supreme moment, the hero's eyes were not undimmed as he said good-bye to his assembled family.

As for Molly, she wept frankly and copiously. A blind devotion springing in her heart, she felt that oblation and sacrifice were necesssary. Some token she must give at any cost.

That was why she picked up a printed leaflet recently left upon the doorstep, and gave it to Bob. A gift from the heart, and Bob's soul being just then susceptible, was touched and he treasured the leaflet for many days.

When the last sign of him had gone, as it seemed to her, for eternity, Molly retired to the nursery weeping for her brother, and would not be comforted.

Sorrow is said to arouse compassion in the human heart. In this case it was not so, for Molly was subsequently discovered thrashing her Teddy Bear without mercy, and punctuating each indictment with a smack.

"He doesn't love me," she said, "he doesn't love Bob, and I believe he's at the bottom of the labour unrest."

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